

A Tale of Two Peoples  
Spirit of Windrush: A Service of Thanksgiving  
Westminster Abbey, Friday 22 June 2018

A sermon by Rev. Canon Joel Edwards

In recent months the word 'Windrush' has evoked a great deal of emotion and legitimate anger across our political landscape. In this service of thanksgiving, Windrush means more than migration.

Windrush is not just a boat. Think of it as a spaceship taking us back to a thousand years of the Black presence in Britain and sailing forward to the unknown horizon. From the watch tower we see and lament over 68 million refugees, migrants and displaced people in this World Refugee Week.

Our Old Testament reading gives us the scope to discuss a tale of two peoples. One from the Commonwealth of Babylon many centuries ago. The other, from the Commonwealth of Great Britain in our own time.

It's difficult to recapture the unsettling global context in our bible reading. In a strange and changing world, some of the best Jewish minds arrived in Babylon and were shocked to realise that this would not be a brief expedition. It would be 70 years. Jeremiah's advice was, settle down. Get involved in the economy, have families. And pray for the city.

When the Windrush arrived in 1948, it was more than a boat with Black people disembarking with double-breast suits, starched-ironed dresses and their suitcase. Or as we called them 'grips.' These people were participants in an amazing period of history. The unprecedented rebirth of the nation of Israel; Ghandi's assassination; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And the NHS. These pioneers came by invitation to build Britain's steel works, transport systems and to make the NHS a health care reality.

But like the people in exile, the Windrush generation was faced with a new dilemma. In the words of a popular psalm, “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

Or to put it another way: how can you be yourself in the place where you weren’t born?

However, 70 years in Babylon produced Daniel the prime minister, senior civil servants and Queen Esther. In captivity, they rediscovered themselves, their history and their understanding of God.

But there was another cost to settlement. There was the lion’s den, of racism, prejudice and even the threat of genocide.

In our story today, Windrush has gifted Britain: trade union leaders, politicians and senior civil servants. A chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons and chaplain to the Queen. Leaders in Britain’s spiritual life, its business, science, the arts, education, music, media and sports. Windrush has impacted British culture and cuisine: rice and peas, jerk chicken and Levi Roots sauce in our supermarkets.

But settling down hasn’t been plain sailing. The children of Windrush have experienced over representation in Britain’s prisons and mental health institutions. Knife crimes. Underachievement in education and the job market. Settlement has meant racism, sometimes too much policing and not enough protection. And Stephen Lawrence.

But in the words of our New Testament reading, sometimes “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Like the Hebrews, the people of Windrush are resilient in the face of both realities. History has taught us that this is often the price of citizenship.

To return to our bible text. When the 70 years expired in Babylon, those who returned to Jerusalem were mainly the nostalgic senior citizens who remembered the grand Temple before it was destroyed.

The most intriguing thing is that we know very little about those in Babylon who had dug in so deeply that they could not - or would not - return to their homeland. What of their future?

And what of the children of Windrush, wondering what it means to remain as a minority in Britain?

As we gather today and our ship sails towards the unknown, one thing is certain: no community decides its future alone.

Whatever it means for the Windrush generation to be Black and British is a political task for everyone. How the Windrush generation continues to pray for the peace of the city will be determined in part, by the conversations we have together in our public spaces.

As Britain adjusts to the possibilities of an unknown future, we must consider not only what Windrush means for us together today, but what Windrush might come to mean in 2088.

We may be perplexed, but Christian faith is all about future hope. And Windrush resilience arises, supremely, from the conviction that God, our help in ages past will always be our hope for years to come.

Rev. Canon Joel Edwards



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