
Keep Awake: Race Relations and Incarnation

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Advent 1 – Year B

Jesus said to his disciples, "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."
Mark 13:24-37

"Keep awake," said Jesus.

And, indeed, many of us around the country were awake this past week. We made sure we were awake and watching the news on Monday evening when a grand jury decision was announced in Missouri, a decision not to indict a police officer who shot and killed an unarmed man this past August.

Many of us stayed awake even longer, worried and watching, to see if danger or violence might erupt in Ferguson, Missouri, and elsewhere. Then, we stayed awake worrying about loved ones everywhere across the country.

Others of us were awake simply worrying about our country. Has the situation in Ferguson, Missouri, really revealed that race relations are no better than they were decades ago? Have all our efforts toward racial reconciliation retreated now?

I don't like staying awake like that. I don't like worrying about police forces across the United States. I would far rather trust them, because I know that the vast and overwhelming majority of our police do not act in impulsive and ill-considered ways. I don't like worrying about young black men in our country, worrying about their safety, and worrying for myself, and worried that maybe I continue to harbor unconscious prejudiced attitudes about my safety. I don't like staying awake like that.

The decision in Missouri last week was another in a series of what people have called "Wake-up" calls in our country. "Wake up," said the decision. And our country's various reactions to the decision said the same thing, "Wake up!" Differently skinned people in our country are indeed treated differently. "Wake up!" Differently skinned people in our country interpret actions and decisions differently. Black people recognize and interpret actions differently than white people do.

"Wake up!" said the demonstrations. The grand jury's decision not to indict will be accepted by many across our country, and it will be criticized and questioned across our country. And around the world, for that matter. And in churches, so many churches, on this very day. Let those conversations and arguments occur. And let the demonstrations, the peaceful and non-violent demonstrations, occur.

Many good comments have been offered this past week. Like many of you, I was especially touched by the honest words of Benjamin Watson, a black football player for the New Orleans Saints. In the midst of his acknowledged anger and fear and embarrassment and sadness, he also said that said that he was both hopeless and hopeful. Yes, some aspects of our race relations in this country seem hopeless. But the best of us do not give up. Those of us who see a better world are hopeful.

Like many of you, I have spent my entire life struggling for just race relations in the communities where I have lived. I was

fortunate to have been taught early in my life about equal respect and equal dignity and equal justice for all races, and especially for African-Americans in the South, where I grew up. But, as a white man, I remain sensitive to those times and places where respect and rights do not seem to be equal, even in my own heart.

Yes, I yearn for a community, a world, where the words “black” and “white” are not just categories, where those words are not simple stereotypes. Those descriptions refer to actual and individual people. Ultimately, each of us, individually, is worried about the same things: security in our streets and neighborhoods, wisdom and moderation in our police forces, non-violence and peace in our protests and demonstrations, and justice in our communities.

“Keep awake.” Now, on this First Sunday of Advent, when the Christian Church always focuses on the kingdom to come, we hear Jesus adding his own words to our conversations. “Keep awake,” says Jesus, and we are urged to keep awake to race relations in our communities.

Keep awake. Do not lost heart. Be watchful and alert. This season of Advent, four weeks before Christmas, always signals for Christians a new kingdom. However, I have come to believe that the word, “kingdom,” is not so great a word to describe what we look for in our time, because “kingdom” itself is a rather outmoded word.

We simply don’t have “kings” any more, and it takes too long to try to re-interpret what our kind of “king” is. First of all, of course, “king” is a male word. (Has anyone noticed, by the way, how so many of the players, on both of the violent sides of our race demonstrations are male? It may be that we don’t need any more male anger and male diffidence and male shooting.)

In the same way, we don’t need just another king. Our God, the God we wait for, is not simply another imperial ruler who will bring another system of justice.

The problem with earthly systems of justice is that they exist only for a season. Every country has imagined that its justice system might be ideal. The Protestant Reformation was a revolution in a way. Certainly it was a protest. The French Revolution. The American Revolution. The Civil War. Even the Civil Rights Act, for which we are truly thankful. As advanced as these developments toward justice were, in their own time, there then came a time when elements of those system also failed us.

So, every year, the Christian Church says, “Keep awake.” There is something greater. We have a God who will not come to us with simply another set of laws. He does not sit as a new judge, settling disputes once and for all.

No, our God comes to earth in new way. God actually comes *as us*. The holy mystery of the incarnation is that God is incarnate among all of us!

Justice and peace emerge in our world, not by our depending upon someone else, or someone outside us. Justice and peace emerge in our world by our acting justly and peacefully in every small personal element of our lives.

Race relationships remain one of the most challenging tests of whether we believe in the incarnation or not. Christianity proclaims that God was incarnate not just in Jesus, but in each of God’s created human beings. We are, each of us, made in the image of God. The reason Christians believe in just race relations is not because of some super-law, or grand jury decision, or new political system at all, but because we believe that God is present, really present, in every human being.

That is a daring proclamation. I dare us to believe it during this season of Advent, waiting for Christmas incarnation. Keep awake. God appears among us, in every day, and in every moment of decision, and in every relationship of our lives.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip