

WAS JESUS WOKE?

First Reading: Unperson

I am the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner.
I am the unperson. The excluded.
The holy, the Other, the Wholly Other.
You?
You are willing to speak on my behalf, but unwilling to hear me.
To speak about me. Without me.
You think you know me.
And you do know me. Second hand.
I am a headline, a statistic, a report.
You know me from a distance. A safe distance.
I remain outside your world. Set apart.
I am holy. Other. Wholly Other.
I am the scum of the earth. The refuse of society. Your society.
I am the way, the truth and the life.
You think you know me.
I am holiness incarnate.
Wholly Other. Outsider.
I am the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner.
I am the unperson. The excluded.
Behold I stand at the door and knock.

Second Reading: 1 John 1:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our^[a] joy may be complete.

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

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Address:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

I grew up in the 80s, in a dark corner of the black country. My family was in so much debt, going to sixth form was just not an option for me, so I taught myself A-levels while I was serving in the Royal Air Force, while helping to support my family. Then, after seven years of military service, I had a succession of jobs as a care-worker in a retirement home, a security guard, a scaffolding manager, and a parker of gigantic sea-faring oil tankers. By the time I arrived at Oxford, I was such an oddity they took a risk and admitted me.

As an undergraduate trainee Baptist minister in my early 20s, one of my arch enemies and closest friends was Kathryn. She was a feminist, a rugby player, a brilliant theologian who would gently and relentlessly ridicule me for the xenophobic tendencies that came with my particular evangelical Christian background. On one occasion, I saw her in the Oxfam bookshop right next to our College. She was fanning through a bright yellow book called, “Theology for Dummies.” I seized the opportunity for revenge. I sneaked up behind her and whispered, “Isn’t that a bit advanced for you?”

When she turned round, she looked horrified. Mostly because she wasn’t Kathryn at all. She was a complete stranger... I mumbled a rapid apology, felt my skin turn bright red, and hurried back out of the shop. So, somewhere in the English-speaking world today, is a person who thinks Oxford is full of pompous people who look down on everyone else from a position of ivory towered privilege.

None of us want to be viewed that way. Certainly not in this day and age – where Woke has become a term to describe an entire moral framework. *Was Jesus Woke?*, is the theme for the term, not only for this evening, and I hope we can explore this from multiple angles. But I have already had quite a reaction to the poster. Some people have said, ‘Obviously he was!’ Others have said, ‘Obviously he wasn’t.’ And I think they are all right.

The meanings of wokeness seem to have multiplied since I first heard the phrase about six years ago. In its origins around a hundred years ago, and still in some parts of the world today, it refers simply to your sensitivity to outsiders. To minorities, to excluded groups, to the injustice with which some groups are treated. In which case, being Woke simply means aware and awake to what the world really is.

If that is Wokism, then Jesus is radically woke: he was born as an outsider, in a provincial nowhere town, to parents of questionable morality, with no credentials but himself. He was dangerously inclusive, he embraced a diversity that was radical

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in his day, and he did this not simply by waving a flag or endorsing generalities – he did it in practice. He was the friend of what his society called ‘sinners’, he challenged religious and political authority, and he was executed outside the gates of polis. The ultimate outsider. In this light, Jesus was woke.

But some manifestations of Wokist morality also may be problematic in several ways, and today, I mention just two. Firstly, as a moral framework that is highly selective in its inclusivity. In particular, a full blown ethical moral framework that refuses to include economic justice. An ethics in which our economic life has no moral import, where poor people have no place on any flag. A wokism, in other words, that offers a highly convenient moral framework for late-stage neoliberal capitalism.

Secondly, some forms of wokism have a xenophobic morality in which *I* belong to the good moral ingroup, and *those* nasty gammon-headed boomers belong to a morally bad group. The implication being that those people out there are in need of moral transformation, and I myself, am not. And the New Testament reading captures the problematic logic of this particular brand of woke morality: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*

The Civil Rights Activist, Philosopher and Baptist, Cornell West, is author of *Race Matters*. And he said he despairs when people approach him and say, “Oh, Dr West – I just want you to know, I am not racist.” And he says, “Oh really. Because I am racist.” I have blind-spots. And I need others in my community to hold me to account when my own racism kicks in. As one of the world’s foremost African American activists, he will not claim to be free of racism. This is the New Testament in action: *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*

My own sensitivity to these negative elements of the morality that some advocates have described as ‘woke’ was brought home to me not long before lockdown. My background, I discovered only a few years ago, is one of relative poverty. I have childhood memories of missing meals, of hiding behind sofas from debt collectors, and of being too poor to go to sixth form. Poverty took a very negative toll on my family. My younger brother never escaped its clutches, and died of alcoholism in 2019. I escaped poverty by joining the military. Not as an officer, but as a knuckle-scraping grunt-monkey. I got demoted from the lowest rank. And even after I had been to Oxford, most of my work has engaged in poverty one way or another. Before I came to Cambridge in 2011, I was sleeping rough in a shop doorway on Fleet Street – but that is another story.

So it was difficult when, in 2019, a student recently arrived from a school that costs over £30k per year, advised me, “Check your privilege!” It would be easy to take offence at this advice. After all, to me – anyone who didn’t have to teach themselves A-level was privileged.

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But...

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

Could it be, that some forms of Woke ethics, are actually highlighting very easily neglected elements of biblical ethics? Ethics that drew Jesus alongside those people who were dismissed as ‘sinners’, ethics that recognise the righteousness of the hated Roman oppressor, and the righteousness of the double-yuk Samaritan. Ethics that cause me to question my own privileges, regardless of my background.

Sure, I know what it is to be hungry, to hide from debt collectors, to be bullied. I know what it is to be stared at because of a severe facial disfigurement, I know what it is to sleep rough. But... I do not know what it is to be ignored or mistreated or dismissed because of my gender. I do not know what it is to be treated differently because of my orientation, or the colour of my skin. I don't know what it is to be an immigrant, a refugee. And because of that, I do not know the extent to which I am complicit in mistreating, or dismissing, or ignoring others on these grounds.

My pride in my own particular background does not excuse me from listening to those of other backgrounds. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*

Back to my friend Kathryn, who did not show up in the Oxfam bookshop. During our time at Oxford, she never once tried to convert me from my evangelical church background. In particular, I had been trained to believe – as the title of one book would have it – that *Leadership is Male*. I never stated that out loud. But I must have radiated the conviction. Kathryn and I never discussed it. But after my time in Oxford, I had changed that belief entirely – not because of any clever argument. But simply because of her. She embodied qualities of leadership that I admired – serious listening, a willingness to have unpleasant and difficult conversations, a willingness to change her mind, a confidence to think out loud, confidence to be wrong in public, and to think – really think. I wanted to be the kind of leader she was ... and she... was not a male man-person.

My mind did not change at a particular moment. I just woke up one day and realised it had. And it had changed because someone I knew simply embodied what she believed.

Was Jesus woke?

This is the kind of question that is likely rebound on any who ask it:

Who are you that dares to ask?

What assumptions do you bring to that question?

What answer were you looking for?

How woke are you?

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What kind of woke are you?

Are you woke enough to change your mind?

And woke enough to change someone else's?

To change someone else's minds with your actions as well as your words?

To embody the readiness to change, that we might expect of others.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Woke Jesus Intercessions

Loving God, Almighty and intimate,

We pray for those who do not belong to our own in-group.

For refugees who are not the right kind of refugees, whose ethnic origins see European borders close to them, while remaining open to others. Awaken us to the realities of our selective welcomes, and show us what to do about it.

For those whose suffering does not make it into the media we consume. May our worldview be formed by a willingness to hear the genuine outsider – and by responding to their appeals to us, and their claim on our privilege.

For those whose religious affiliations we find ignorant, half-baked or repulsive. Bless them, we pray. And may we hear something of your wisdom in their belief.

For those individuals who have been vilified without being heard. For people we prefer to hate than to hear. Those we have learned to demonise because of how others have already branded them.

For those we meet only when they deliver our takeaway, or wash our car, or pack our shopping. May their humanity be more visible to us, than the service they provide for us.

For those whose personal struggles we do not understand. Give us the courage to inhabit the stories of others, to become part of their story, to allow them to become part of ours.

For our churches, our communities, and for this college. May our life together remain worthy of the values we treasure. May we be worthy of the flags we fly and the claims we make. May the relationships formed in this place, bring life to the world beyond this place.