

LYNITA'S PONDERINGS

“WOKE”? WHAT’S THAT?

Anyone who has a basic knowledge of the English language knows that the word “woke” is the past tense of “wake”, as in the sentence: “I woke up at 7 o’clock this morning”. And, of course, the word is still used in this way. However, as languages are dynamic, words take on new meanings. Way back in 1938, after several black men in America were falsely accused of rape, they coined the term “woke”, which means staying awake, being aware, of racial discrimination. Over time, this term was used in other contexts, such as awareness of the rights of other groups, such as women, people of varying sexual orientations and people with disabilities.

Many organisations, including the Methodist Church in Britain, are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the world can no longer be dominated by only one group of people. And in order to create greater awareness, organisations develop programmes which are called Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). (In the USA these seem to be referred to as DEI). These programmes, in themselves, may not change attitudes, but they are at least an attempt to address the many inequalities which still exist in our society.

Unfortunately, both in this country and in the USA, the original meaning of the word “woke” has been vilified and demonised. It is as if some people feel very threatened by voices that were silent for centuries and are starting to speak up. There are those who dismiss EDI programmes as “woke” in the negative sense of the word. And over the past few weeks, we have seen the rise of the “anti-woke” culture, in which any group that does not fit the majority is scapegoated, blamed, victimised.

But why focus on this topic in a circuit magazine? Surely, this is entering the political arena? To some extent that is true. However, we will soon be starting our journey through Lent towards Easter. Lent prepares us to commemorate the death of Jesus and the fact that he was raised from the dead. But that begs the question: why was Jesus killed? And the answer is that he took notice of and gave dignity to the poor, those in captivity, the oppressed, the blind, lepers, the list goes on. The establishment could not cope with the fact that Jesus placed these groups centre stage. And I would suggest that if Jesus was walking the earth in physical form in our time, he would have been accused of being “woke” in the negative sense.

Our challenge as Christ followers and the church, is to reclaim the concept of being “woke” in the positive sense. If we want to be true to Jesus’ agenda, then we must be prepared to be “woke”, even though this may result in our being vilified and victimised.

Dr Michael Waters is the founding pastor of an AME church in Dallas. In a sermon preached just before the 2016 US election, he said the following, words which are appropriate for us now:

“When the church is woke, new life comes to dead situations and overcomes fatal circumstances. When the church is woke, the captives are set free. When the church is woke, signs and wonders follow. When the church is woke, healing and deliverance take place. When the church is woke, the people are not condemned, but they are empowered.”

(This sermon is quoted in a book edited by Phil Snider entitled Preaching as Resistance 2018, Chalice Press).