

The Last Acceptable Form of Racism

Today is Racial Justice Sunday and the theme chosen this year highlights racial discrimination against travelling people. Racism against travellers in all its forms has been described as ‘the last acceptable form of racism’. Many people in this country who would strongly oppose and condemn racial slurs and discrimination against all other ethnic minorities would have a different view of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT for short). It is widely acceptable, it seems, to discriminate against this group of human beings in a way which is now wholly unthinkable in regard to other minorities.

In 2015 the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report on the state of equality and human rights in Britain. The report found that discrimination against Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT) – despite these communities being classed as ethnic groups and therefore theoretically protected against discrimination – remains a common occurrence. To quote:

The people who took part in this research told stories of being refused entry to pubs, told they can’t register for the doctors or told they weren’t even allowed into the pictures with their family. All because of their ethnicity.

Discrimination against the Travelling communities is found in every sector of life. The following are quotes from those contributing to research of their own experience of discrimination in all walks of life.

In Education: 70% of travellers interviewed said they had experienced discrimination in schools and other places of learning: Here are some comments from contributors:

- “The teachers at my school were worse than the pupils for highlighting that I was different”
- One respondent claimed a teacher said: “there is no point teaching you, you will only end up tarmacking drives”
- “A head teacher [was] showing me and my child around her school. [She] was perfectly polite until I told her we were Travellers. She then launched into a rude and extremely judgmental lecture on personal hygiene and time keeping. I took my child to a different school.”

In Employment: 49% of GRT contributors reported discrimination in the workplace. Some comments:

- “I went for a cleaning job; when I told her where I lived she, as the pub owner, said ‘we don’t serve your sort and I would not employ you’
- “I have worked for a company and I was asked not to come back because the other men refused to work with a Gypsy”
- Most Travellers disguise their identity for fear of discrimination in the workplace.

In Healthcare: 30% of Travellers reported discrimination in accessing healthcare. Again, a quote:

- GPs repeatedly “refused help for my child’s hernia because [we] were of no fixed abode”.

Additionally GRT ethnic minorities list examples of bias by police who, typically, fail to react and respond when Gypsies are under attack from the public, even when they are being burned out whereas, they claim, police are quick to act when they receive complaints from the public and often force travellers to move on even when legitimately parked up with the permission and blessing of landowners. Consistently legal rights of Roma and Gypsies fail to be upheld or honoured.

Not uncommonly Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are denied access to amenities and facilities open to all others including public spaces, transport, shops, restaurants, sporting events and the like. In 2004, the now former Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips, drew comparison between the racism towards Gypsies and Travellers in the UK to that of the racism towards black people living in the American south during the 1950s.

Many people would argue that GRT communities are anti-social, unhygienic, inclined to criminal activities and out of control, their settlements are unsightly, and they fail to observe the conventions others guide their lives by. Often these views are biased and unexamined assumptions. However, it is true, the GRT way of life often defies the conventions of conforming society and challenges many of our ingrained assumptions about human behaviour, child-rearing, community, education family relationships, prosperity, and so on. But these are differences that perhaps we should reflect on because they enshrine values we might have lost sight of and which could enrich and broaden our own received positions. In the end, travelling people are our fellow human beings made, just like us,

in the image and likeness of God and we have the same duties of respect, acceptance and tolerance towards them as towards all other fellow human beings.

The Church, gladly, has always recognised a mission and ministry to GRT people, many of whom are devout Catholics. As a community often treated as outcasts, we are in our attitude towards them, as always, guided by the teaching and example of Jesus who had a particular care, concern and love for the outcast. The Vatican has a department for the pastoral care and defence of migrants and travellers and their human rights, as does the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales; and in this diocese, I am proud to report, we have a priest, Fr John Chadwick, who has founded the Margaret Clitherow Trust, to deliver legal advocacy, pastoral care, family counselling, spiritual services and all kinds of ministry and service to the travelling community. By a curious and happy coincidence, Fr John Chadwick celebrates the 25th anniversary of his ordination today.

Recently Pope Francis, visiting a GRT community in Rome said to them:

You are not on the margins of the Church...you are at the centre...you are at the heart of the Church...The time has come to put an end to age-old prejudices, preconceptions and mutual mistrust that are often at the base of discrimination, racism and xenophobia. No one must feel isolated, and no one is authorised to trample on the dignity and rights of others...Let us allow the Gospel of mercy to shake our consciences and let us open our hearts and hands to the neediest and most marginalised”.