

Mr Simpson's Thought for the Week

12th June 2020.

I'm sure we've all seen the development in protests, about racism and the past, over this last week. These concerns have been around for some time but have been given added impetus by the death in police custody of George Floyd, which I discussed in last week's thought. There have been some interesting discussions, as well as some unsettling comments made, about where society should go from here.

So what do you think about statues being removed and street or building names being replaced? Does it sound over the top? Many people have expressed opinions about this and a lot of the discussion has become quite heated. As a result many have found themselves having to make an "either/or" sort of choice. As a teacher of ethics and philosophy, I'm always interested in this because most decisions in life aren't simply a question of "you're one thing or you're the other." Except, perhaps, the question of Marmite...

People have a legal right to peaceful protest. What happens when we see people protesting violently? Is it an act of violence to tear down a statue? You could argue that it is. When the statue of 17th century slave trader Edward Colson was destroyed by a group of protesters, they were doing something that was, strictly speaking, against the law. But since then, we've been reminded of how a lot of Britain's wealth and standing in the world has been built on slavery. Other statues and prominent historical figures have come under the microscope. We've been reminded that, when slavery was abolished in the 19th century, British slave traders were compensated for their loss of income by the government. This debt was only completed in 2015. Bizarrely and outrageously, this means that the taxes of BAME Britons were being used to pay off a debt of money that had been paid to people who mistreated and brutalised some of their ancestors! So, was it wrong to destroy Colson's statue?

I'd say no, it was right. The campaign to have it removed had been going on for years, peacefully, democratically, but had met a lot of resistance in terms of administrative issues. Most people who have had no opinion on this so far (including me – I'd never heard of it) have questioned why we ever had a statue celebrating Colson in a prominent UK city in the first place. So I'm pretty sure that if we had a national vote now, people would support its removal. A questionable tactic has resulted in something good, I would argue, and not for the first time in the history of protest. Martin Luther King, again referenced last week, advocated peaceful civil disobedience. Many people who supported his ideals criticised his methods at the time.

So, do I think it was right to tear down Colson's statue? In retrospect, yes. Would I have advocated this tactic before it happened? Probably not. Do I think this should be done to other statues and to cover them with graffiti? No. Interestingly, there is a lot of discussion within different communities about the value of keeping monuments that reflect questionable episodes in our national narrative. There is an ability to see them for what they were. The most important thing is that we're talking about it!

However, I do think that we need, as a country, to talk about and explore the facts about how our colonial past has affected the issues with racism that we now face, and that we must acknowledge the part played by Britain in all of this. This is not to try to remove history, but to acknowledge it and to learn from it. If that means changing some street names and statues to reflect our growing self-confidence as a diverse, rainbow nation, then it's a small price to pay.