

CHARLES KIMBANGI

Welcome back. It's week 5, and the title this week is 'Best served with grace'. It's great to have you back with us. I'm here with Phil Varley. He's one of the pastors at King's, has been here for about 20 years and oversees all the sites at King's Church London. Phil, I know you've played a part in bringing this series together. We're calling it INVITED. Why don't you tell us where we've been over the past couple of weeks?

PHIL VARLEY

Okay. Well, obviously we called it INVITED because of the idea that the gospel is an invitation. Sometimes we end up thinking of it as being an obligation, but it's an invitation, and we talked about that right at the top of the series. We took the picture of a table because the table – eating together – is talked about a lot in the New Testament, and actually in the Old as well, and it symbolises connection and fellowship and being close to people, and we're invited to His table – we're invited by Him. But also this work of the cross is that now we can come together as well, and it's what the table symbolises and it's a really great application of how we should live it out – who we have at our tables. The advance of the Kingdom is not just about reaching people out there, it's about God doing something in our own hearts, and that affects who we have at our tables.

So that's where we started, and then these last few weeks have really been about how we live it out, about acceptance, about the issue of trust, which is critical, and forgiveness and the key part that plays.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

We've been looking through the book of Acts, haven't we, and a few weeks ago we looked at a fascinating story in Acts 10 where Peter sees a vision, goes to Cornelius's house, realises that the Gospel is for all people, not just for the Jews, and he begins to eat with Gentiles. But seemingly things start to change, because in Galatians 2 we see that Paul goes to Peter and opposes him to his face about stepping away from Gentiles. So clearly something's gone wrong there, perhaps. So Paul goes to oppose Peter. Tell us why that happens, and what's so important about that?

PHIL VARLEY

I obviously again, eating symbolises so much, so it's not a casual thing, who you're choosing to eat with. It really matters. It's a real sign of acceptance, and that's why Jesus going for meals with all difference types of people created such a stir, because he was effectively saying, 'I accept them'. Paul opposes Peter, I think, partly because this is such a critical issue right at the birthing of the church, so it's like, we've got to get this right, Peter. So I think that's one of the reasons. But I think what that story shows us is not only that it's for everybody again, but I think it illustrates the fact that in one chapter Peter's caught this vision that this is what it's like, which is hopefully what we have done, or are doing, but also what it illustrates is that it's just sometimes much harder to live it out. And that's what he's doing – he's showing how human he is because it's easier sometimes to separate than to come together. That's what you see in his life, and we can live like that. You can catch the vision, but living it out is slightly a different thing, and I think that's what you see.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

You talked about living out diversity, if you like. Tell us a bit about your story, maybe a bit about your background, and what it's been like for you, living in London?

PHIL VARLEY

Sure. I grew up outside of London, about 30 miles north of London – a very different place. A white middle-class town, pretty much all white people at school – one or two Indian boys, I remember, but basically just white kids. And that was my experience. I travelled around the world a bit, and lived in other places, but basically I'd grown up in that kind of environment. Then I moved to London in my early 20s, and that was probably the first part of beginning to live somewhere different. There is so much you could say about this. Obviously I joined King's and it was already in measure quite mixed and diverse, not to the extent that it is now, but it was already like that. I think part of the journey, which I think is not unique to me as a white person, because I think a lot of white people are like this, part of the journey was becoming aware of how unaware I had been – not that there were different people, because that was completely apparent – but that different people have different ways of looking at the world, and that as a white person, your way is not THE way. It's just A way. And I think that's one of the things you have to learn to understand when

you've grown up, if you like, in the majority in a system which is more shaped by your own background and your own culture, which is the one I grew up in. You can assume that this is just the way it is, but it's not – it's just A way. I think I began to learn that I had been extremely unaware and I began to learn that, particularly people who had moved to the UK from other parts of the world and other cultures, and people of other classes, were not as advantaged, and I was in an advantaged position. So there was a whole bunch of stuff, but I think the first thing was becoming aware that I had been really unaware. And then I just had different things – one significant moment for me was, I had a conversation with Owen when Owen Hylton was on our team, and we were talking about all these issues. We had quite an honest conversation about experiencing racism, and I was like, I've not really experienced...I don't think I've shown any, which I'm sure is not true, but that's how you feel. I said I feel like having moved to London I've experienced more racism as a white person, and he said, 'Tell me about that', so I told him about one moment, when I was walking down the street in Catford and I happened to just walk into a group of young...just happened to be a group of young black men. This wasn't all my experience of young black men, but on this occasion it was. They became quite aggressive towards me, and seemingly simply because of who I was, not because of anything I'd actually done. It wasn't a very comfortable moment. I remember telling Owen about this and he was really helpful for me. He said, 'We don't condone that. That way of handling people is not okay for any culture or any class', but then he said to me, 'but you might want to reflect on why they reacted to you the way they did. What is it about you that they find hard, and maybe why they're angry?' It was a very short conversation, but it was like he gave me a key. Again, a bit about a journey of awareness for me that there were systemic, historic reasons why who I represent, this group of young men felt naturally distrustful of because of what I look like and who I represent, and because of what they've experienced of people like me and the system we've grown up in. So that was quite a key learning for me.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

It's fascinating, and we can't ignore history, can we. We can't ignore legacy issues of slavery and abuse and all that has gone on in the past. Can you talk to us a bit about legacy because so much has gone on in the past that we can't ignore. How can we deal with issues of legacy today?

PHIL VARLEY

That is a really good question, and I always feel a little nervous about answering that kind of question, because I feel like such a novice, basically. There are whole loads of things that I don't appreciate, I think. I did a history degree and even with that I think sometimes you can be completely unaware of what that's like for different cultures, according to their history. But a few things I think I have learnt. I think one is that legacy is real, and we all live in the good or the bad of history. It's quite a tricky issues for most cultures, and I think it's quite tricky for white people because often when we talk about legacy, and let's say we talk culturally of different races, where I've grown up is in a country that had an empire, all round the world, and that generated a lot of wealth for this nation at the expense of a lot of other nations. Obviously there were some good things about it, but there were also a lot of really awful things about that which maybe does or does not get taught properly in schools. I think we struggle sometimes as white people to (a) be aware of what that was like and what we've done in our past, and (b) sometimes we struggle with the idea of having to associate with that – something that happened two hundred years ago by a white English person, sometimes you can feel 'I didn't do that'. 'Why do I have to associate...I wouldn't have done that', we like to think, and hopefully, but who knows? There's a good chance we may have done if we'd grown up then. So I think there is a legacy for white people which we don't always want to associate with, because actually it's something that's not very good in terms of the way we treated other nations, and obviously some of that is much more recent history as well. But I think that the issue with legacy is things do get passed down from generation to generation, and that happens, and I think that if you've grown up in a culture that has been mistreated and oppressed by another culture, there's a very good chance that generationally, through the stories that are told in your family, or the ways that your peers act towards that other culture, you will pick a mistrust of that culture. There are legacies, good and bad, that get carried down through all our cultures. Obviously I've grown up in a white middle class in a country that basically, although things have changed, effectively the system is still advantaged in my favour. Things we all know now, or at least I think we should all know now. I've only been stopped by the police a couple of times when driving my car, mainly because my cars were so awful they wanted to know how they were still working! Whereas I have other friends, black friends, who've been stopped loads of times. Now why would that be? Obviously that's just a very

small example, but there are a whole range of others things – and I think as white people sometimes we can't see them because we're living in it. So there are issues, and certainly if I can talk as a white person, I think one of the most important things is to become aware of it and to acknowledge it where, if I've grown up in a culture that has advantaged ourselves off the basis of another culture, and we still live in that, financially or whatever, then I think it's important to acknowledge it, and to be humble and open about it, because we can come across as superior because we don't want to look.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

As a black British guy, I know lots of people that have been stopped by the police too many times because of being black, or being overlooked for jobs because of who they are, and it can be really hard for people like myself to not become bitter, resentful, and it's really hard for us to forgive, really. And I'm sure that's the same for all people. But help us here, for everyone – how do we forgive people, and how do we look to move forward without feeling bitter?

PHIL VARLEY

I think that's why we're talking about forgiveness, and again this is a very difficult subject. The problem about talking about it at all is that it can appear glib, like it's easy, and it's not to be like that. It is critical. If I just talk on a one to one relationship, because I think how you talk about that then relates to how cultures can relate. For you and I to know each other there has to be a degree of...I have to let you in on who I really am. I guess the word often used in that scenario is disclosure. For you to really get to know me – you can only be loved to the extent that you're known, is what people say – I have to disclose something to you about who I really am: what makes me laugh, what makes me cry, what I'm anxious about. For me to do that, I take a risk because I don't know how you're going to respond. Will you still like me? Do you like me? But will you still like me if I tell you this about me? For me to disclose something is risky and takes a degree of trust. So trust is the key commodity that allows me to disclose, and if I disclose, you may disclose, and our friendship might form and go deeper.

Now, the problem is obviously where trust has already been damaged in the relationship, what we really want to do is withdraw. You can see that in cultures where, because of my history, I am intuitively cautious about your culture. So I

had a friend of mine, who happened to be a black, young guy, who once said to me, 'You just need to know, Phil, that I struggle to trust white men'. Now that was a moment of disclosure, actually, and I'm not saying that's unique to him or his culture at all, but he said that to me as a real conversation. It was a moment of disclosure, and actually it was a trust moment, because he said, 'I'm going to make myself vulnerable to you'. But where there is a trust issue, either because something has happened to this relationship or because culturally something has happened in our history which means your culture has mistreated mine, and therefore I want to separate, the answer to the trust question is forgiveness. It's not easy, but that's the gift. We often think of forgiveness like, if I was to forgive you for something you did, Charles, we can kind of think it's something I'm bestowing on you, I'm giving to you. The question then is, you don't deserve it because you wronged me. I only want to forgive you if you acknowledge your wronging of me. But I think we have to view it differently. Forgiveness is a gift that is given to us, because when I hold it against you, I hold it against you because I want to keep you prisoner, but actually the person I'm keeping prisoner is me. When I forgive you, the freeing happens in me, and allows me to get free. I think that's so relevant one to one, but it's relevant between cultures, between classes, and this happens all around the world where one culture or one class is not treating another one right. Instantly you meet someone from that background and they represent that culture, and you mistrust them. There is a trust issue there, and the way to deal with that is to start to work towards forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean we forget. It doesn't mean we condone. It doesn't mean even necessarily that we reconcile. It means that I let go of my right to hold this against you, and I get free.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

That's really helpful, Phil, and we know that diversity is broader than race, don't we. It encompasses a whole range of things. I'd love for you now just to pray for us, for everyone, that we can forgive people that have wronged us, and that we can move forward in this area of diversity. Thank you.

PHIL VARLEY

So God, we thank you for this picture of the church. We thank you that you love your church, and we thank you for the opportunity together, as we live in this part of London, to have the richness of all the different backgrounds, and

classes, and cultures amongst us. We just want to pray for your wisdom and your courage and your guidance as we look to build this kind of church. Help us to forgive people when they have wronged us. Help us to be brave and wise about that, and we pray, God, that together you'd help us build a church that represents something of your amazing wisdom in this part of London. We pray it in your name, Jesus. Amen.

CHARLES KIMBANGI

It's been great to have Phil with me today. I hope you enjoyed listening in. Do enjoy your group discussions now, and we'll see you next week.

