

Speech for General Synod

You may think of the Diocese of Salisbury as not very ethnically diverse. In fact, we have a significant minority ethnic population, our Gypsy, Roma and Traveller population. We are one of only two dioceses with a chaplain to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. A 'chaplain to itinerant van dwellers' as it was called was first appointed by the then bishop of Salisbury in the nineteenth century and his successor, Revd Jonathan Herbert, was one of the authors of the paper that is before you. I think we may also be one of only one dioceses to have ordained a priest from that community! Recently I had the opportunity to visit a Traveller site near Salisbury and also to have conversations with some Romany Gypsies from our diocese. What I want to say to you is what they said to me.

What do we mean when we talk about 'the last acceptable form of racism'? We like to think of racism as something practised by other people, unpleasant people, people we disapprove of, but racism against Gypsies and Travellers is practised by nice people, respectable people, religious people, people like us. That is what emboldens the media to write about them in the way they often do.

The Daily Mail covered this debate under the headline 'Forgive those who trespass', with four pictures of heaps of rubbish. The take home message was plain – Gypsies and Travellers, dirty trespassers. Days later on the front page of the Telegraph we read that ministers want to make trespass a criminal offence, a move targeted at travellers, who, lacking suitable sites, pull up on what used to be common land but is now privately owned. Then there were the 'comments'. Don't look at what's below the line in online articles unless you have a strong stomach. I scrolled down through several dozen and they made me feel both sick and sad.

Make no mistake, Gypsies and Travellers fear the orchestrated nature, the unspoken purposefulness, the cruel intention underlying all of this. 2,897, that's a figure they have by heart. That's the number of gypsies who perished in Auschwitz on the so called 'Night of the Gypsies', the second of August 1944. And that is only part of a much larger statistic – we think as many as half a million people perished in the Romany Holocaust. Gypsies and Travellers understand the terrifying trajectory of racism in which 'You shall not live among us on equal terms' becomes 'You shall not live among us' becomes 'You shall not live'.

Sometimes our attitude towards Gypsies and Travellers springs from far more benign but no less misguided motives. Wouldn't it be better if they moved into permanent dwellings and enjoyed the benefits of settled life such as healthcare and education? I've heard what some of them have to say about that. 'Bricks and mortar are no good for us. We need the two wheels'. A young woman who had tried to live in a fixed dwelling described to me the negative impact that had had on her mental health. She returned after two years to live on the site where the rest of her family were.

Making space for Gypsies and Travellers is typically presented as a complex and intractable problem. People are astonished to learn that all of them could be accommodated on as little as one square mile of land. What's lacking is not the means but the will and here the role of Chaplains is vital. If only more Chaplains could get to know these communities, earn their trust, understand their way of life, and advocate for their needs, not instead of but alongside them. Many Gypsies and Travellers are people of faith so we have a double duty to them, not just as fellow citizens but as fellow Christians. In this 75th anniversary year of the 'Night of the Gypsies', I urge us to wholeheartedly support this motion.