

# Faith and understanding hold the key to change

Former Lancashire Post journalist **Ato Erzan-Essien** explains what the Black Lives Matter movement means to him and how he believes it can be a driving force for much needed change in the world

**F**unnily enough, it has been a strange couple of weeks being black in the UK.

I have experienced a heady mix of thoughts and emotions ranging from deep-seated anger and despair, to weary cynicism, followed by immense hope.

And as a consequence, it has become all the more difficult to ascribe any form of credible meaning to the events surrounding the horrific death of George Floyd in the US city of Minneapolis.

I can dream however. Martin Luther King – who was murdered a little over three months before I was born, loomed large in my formative years when I was trying to make sense of what it meant to be a black person in the world.

King's message impressed me because it comprised a steely-eyed determination to stare down the terrifying brutality of deeply entrenched bigotry in the so-called 'Land of the Free'.

On the other hand, he seemed to have an ability to reach out to his adversaries in a way that made an apparently bitter pill for white Americans a little easier to swallow.

During my childhood, King's approach was often contrasted with that of his contemporary Malcolm X who was killed some three years earlier. X was portrayed as conveying a much more uncomfortable message – wrongly accused, among other things, of rejecting reconciliation in favour of African-American separation from their white counterparts.

In truth, the road both men advocated was a very narrow one and led to the same end point: they demanded that African-Americans, and black people generally, be accepted fully



Civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, left, and Malcolm X and, right, former Lancashire Post journalist Ato Erzan-Essien



and unequivocally as members of humanity in every sphere of society, from the bottom right through to the very top.

And as history tells us, the response, despite occasional glimmers of hope, has so far swayed between a resounding 'no' to, at best, a 'not yet'.

So why the hesitancy? The statement 'Black Lives Matter' can seem, to some, a little innocuous at first glance. That is why the response from those who interpret it as a kind of anti-white provocation have found it so easy to fire back with the true, but blindingly obvious 'All Lives Matter' riposte.

However, the genius of the BLM slogan is that when you put your mind to declaring it with even a small degree of sincerity, it is, I believe, actually quite unsettling.

The reason for this is that it is meant to be so much more than a slogan. Refined by history, it has been formed into something that

end of the 18th century after being taken and sold as a slave himself.

The echo is also found in Linda Brent's account of her experiences of slavery in the lead up to the American Civil War which culminated in Emancipation throughout the United States. Back to this side of the Atlantic, the echo was in Mary Seacole's quiet determination to care for casualties of the Crimean War, despite being prevented, because she was black, from contributing to the first healthcare revolution led by Florence Nightingale who also did so much to transform the derisory attitude taken by the ruling establishment towards ordinary serving soldiers.

**What do you think?**



**What do you think needs to happen to remove racism from society?**

**Write to: lepforujm@jpimedia.co.uk**

began long before Malcolm X and King, who echoed it in their own rhetoric.

The echo of it is found in the letters of Jonathan Strong, the former slave who learned to read and write so he could properly articulate his cruel treatment at the hands of his one-time English master.

Many believe Strong's story served as a catalyst for the movement calling for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

The echo is also found in writer Olaudah Equiano's story; who vocally and vigorously campaigned for Abolition in Britain towards the

end of the 18th century after being taken and sold as a slave himself.

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The echo is also found its place in the Pan African Congress – which held its fifth and what is regarded as its most significant meeting in Manchester in 1945, on the final, difficult (and at times bloody) leg of the walk towards independence from

British rule for many African and Caribbean nations begun some 50 years earlier.

And without even detailing the echo in the likes of Harriet Tubman, Marcus

Garvey, Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Rosa Parkes, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith, John Carlos, Maya Angelou, Steve Biko or Nelson Mandela, Black Lives Matter is the latest manifestation of it. But in spite of that historical context, it is so much more than that. It is a confession of faith.

Framing it as a confession is critical to making sense of

all that is happening at this moment in history – from the revulsion at the killing of black men and women at the hands of those who any decent, civilised society should expect to protect them, to the dismantling of statues honouring men whose philanthropic reputations fed on the inhumanity and horror of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, to the critical examination of views and statements on race by some of the country's greatest leaders - William Gladstone and Winston Churchill most prominent in this.

Because faith does not require understanding. It is designed to be the starting point from which you walk towards enlightenment. To 'confess' faith, is to declare it honestly and sincerely. To begin to 'do' faith – you only have to stand.

Black Lives Matter, demands people like you to stand with people like me. And when people like you start your walk, people like me will be walking alongside you.

## Author

Ato Erzan-Essien, is a senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Chester and former reporter for the Lancashire Evening Post. He is 51 and married with three teenage daughters.

**47.8m** uses of #blacklivesmatter hashtag on Twitter

**2013** start of the Black Lives Matter movement

My story is your story. My history is your history. So let's stand and begin the walk.