

Sunday, 1 October 2023  
The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity  
Philippians 2.1-13; Psalm 105 vv.37-43; and The Gospel of Matthew 21.23-32  
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!'**

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

Today in 1960 Nigeria proclaimed independence from British Rule. I wanted to begin by wishing you all a very Happy Nigerian Independence Day. It's true that were aliens to arrive on earth, we would struggle to explain colonialism to them. What makes one nation think it could travel across the world, sending its people to subjugate others, leaving chaos in its wake? What were the roots behind this sort of thinking? These are questions for another sermon, perhaps.

Today, however, you do have a reason, as if any were needed, to spend the day eating plantain and jollof rice, pounded yam and vegetable stew (my personal favourite) finished off with some chin chin (sweet biscuits) while you binge watch Nollywood films until dawn.

In honour of Nigerian Independence Day, I wanted to offer a lesson in pidgin English. Pidgin is a bit of a safe bet for a nation that has five prominent languages and over 500 additional indigenous languages. Using pidgin means you don't have to show your politics or tribal affiliation. So when I say, *Wetin dey happen?*, meaning what's happening or what's going on?, please reply with: *Wahala dey o!* *Wahala dey o* simply means there is a trouble or there is a problem. Let's try that.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

You can imagine people saying *wahala dey o* every single time that Jesus showed up. We hear in the Gospel of Matthew 21:23:

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

As one scholar puts it:

"By what authority?" is not simply an inquiry from wary leaders or religious authorities consumed with proper credentials. It is a legitimate question, a justified question, that Jesus has to answer. You don't get to go around and talk about God the way Jesus does and then skirt this issue.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Karoline Lewis, 'By what authority': <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/by-what-authority>, September 24, 2023.

Typically, however, Jesus answers the question with a question, tying the religious leaders up in knots as they struggled to respond:

25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" 26 But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' 27 So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

While they may have had every right to answer the question, Jesus also knew what they were doing. *'Who gave you the right?'*, was the question that they were really asking. Who gave you the right to show us up, embarrass us, disregard us, mock us? Who gave you the right to be more welcomed than us, to be more engaging than us, to be more accepting than us?

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

Of course, Jesus means trouble because his mere presence is disruptive. What Jesus ushers in is a new way of being and thinking, and seeing the world, and it gives us a certain kind of purpose that emboldens us, and fills us up with divine love and means that we cannot unsee that which has been seen.

Going to school should not have to be a matter of life and death. Elianne Andam was stabbed and killed at a bus stop on her way to school last week. The Bishop of Croydon, Dr Rosemarie Mallett, who was here recently unveiling the plaque to commemorate Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, read a statement from Elianne's family that said they were "'overwhelmed by sorrow and grief"...We as a family are struggling to comprehend this painful tragedy that has happened to our beautiful daughter and beloved sister Elianne," the statement said.<sup>2</sup> Here, Bishop Rosemarie used her authority to lend a voice to those whose voices had been hollowed out by grief.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

The problem is not the young people, but a culture that ignores gender-based violence in the hope that it will go away. Elianne was the fifteenth teenager to die this year in our capital, and we are still only in September. Yes, there is a problem here and there needs to be conversation about knife crime and gender-based violence without criminalising every black and brown teenager in London and in our other cities.

---

<sup>2</sup>Croydon stabbing: Our hearts are broken, Elianne Andam's family says', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-66942668>.

With great authority comes great responsibility. We hear in the Letter to the Philippians (2: 3-4):

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Perhaps this is what the government thought it was doing when it ignored the reality of the climate emergency. Again last week, “the [development of] the UK’s biggest untapped oilfield, Rosebank, which lies to the west of Shetland in Scotland, was given the go-ahead despite widespread opposition from scientists, poverty campaigners and climate and energy experts.”<sup>3</sup>

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

Yes, you’re right. There is a problem here. The trouble and challenge of the climate crisis seem to be held as something far off by those in authority, and those who should know better. A hot September isn’t what we are talking about here. When countries burn and cities flood, we will not be able to say that we were not told. We do not need any new oilfields to be drilled to help our transition from oil and gas to a more sustainable way of living. You can take the coloniser out of empire, but you can’t take empire out of them. We see this is a colonial mentality that does not recognise consequence or seek accountability.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

The authority bestowed on Jesus through God is used to teach and share a vision of a different type of world, in which those on the margins of society get front row seats at Wimbledon and those stripped of their dignity and humanity are given the royal box. When authority is used to undermine human rights, we need to stay alert and respond. For the Home Secretary to attack the UN Refugee agency’s 1950 refugee convention is an abuse of power that needs to be called out. She knows it and she does not care.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

The Refugee Convention was drawn up following World War Two, and has at its centre the principle that refugees should not be returned to countries where they

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Taylor, ‘Activists stage Rosebank oilfield protest outside offices of Labour frontbench’, *The Guardian*, Friday 29 September 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/29/activists-stage-rosebank-oilfield-protest-offices-labour-frontbench>.

face threats to their life or freedom<sup>4</sup>. In a speech this past week, the Home Secretary Suella Braverman stated "Where individuals are being persecuted, it is right that we offer sanctuary. But we will not be able to sustain an asylum system if, in effect, simply being gay, or a woman, and fearful of discrimination in your country of origin is sufficient to qualify for protection".<sup>5</sup> So please tell us: what exactly would qualify us for protection? The Home Secretary has no idea what people endure to reach our shores and instead stokes the fires of hatred through self-advancing rhetoric. We need to quench the fires of hatred with the waters of justice. Because this is the kind of dangerous talking that leads us to isolation, then segregation, and then deportation. Her speech was applauded by the far-right. This is authority misused, and authority misused is authority abused.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

Is there? Is there really trouble? Because Home Office figures show [that] 1,334 asylum 'applications were lodged in the UK in 2022, where sexual orientation formed part of the basis for the claim. This represented 1.5% of the 74,751 asylum claims made last year.<sup>6</sup> The trouble is not Jesus, or black or brown people, or teenagers or women, or the LGBTQ+ community. The *wahala* is unfettered authority and privilege; the *wahala* is the culture that does not address men's mental health and the toxicity of online communities, videos and personalities. The *wahala* is the masculinity that defines itself through violence. On a national scale, intentionally reckless rhetoric will only bring more *wahala*.

*Wetin dey happen? Wahala dey o!*

How will we use our authority? Author and authority share the same root and, if we are to be authors, creators of a more just, more equitable world, we need to have the vision to see what is happening, the courage to call out the *wahala*, and place all our hope on God to show us how to use the authority we have for the greater good. Yes, *wahala dey o*, but there is no *wahala* greater than the love, peace and justice of God. The authority of God, as seen in Jesus Christ makes clear what we have to do. Time and time again we see that Jesus's authority is used for inclusion and justice.

We heard in the psalm: "You spread out a cloud for a covering/ and a fire to give light in the night season". It has been a week in which the night season may have

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Anti-gay discrimination not qualification for asylum, says Suella Braverman': <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66919416>.

<sup>5</sup> Rajeev Syal and Ben Quinn, 'UN rebukes Suella Braverman over her attack on refugee convention', Tuesday, 26 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/26/un-suella-braverman-refugee-convention-unhcr-migration>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Tory MPs complain to chief whip about Suella Braverman's asylum speech': <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66964607>.

felt overwhelming, and for so many reasons. Yet our yearning for brighter days must be underpinned by an authority that seeks not to conquer, but redistribute, seeks not to dehumanise, but understand, seeks not to destroy, but to rebuild and restore.

**Amen.**