

**A sermon preached by The Rt. Rev'd Howard Gregory, Bishop of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, at The Anglican Church of St. Paul, L'Amoreaux, Toronto, Canada in celebration of Black History Month, February 17, 2013**

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we put ourselves before you in this moment with waiting heart, expectant desire. Open our eyes that we may see your promise fulfilled; open our ears that we may hear your word whispered to our deepest being. For we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the gospel of Matthew chapter 14:13-21, there is recorded his account of the feeding of the five thousand. The narrative ends with the interesting comment that the number of person fed was five thousand, "Not counting women and children" ("besides women and children" KJV). For centuries we have received that narrative without batting an eyelid. Some female biblical scholars have, however, drawn our attention to the condescending and paternalistic nature of this comment and which later led to the publication of a book entitled, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected stories from the Bible* by Megan McKenna. As one reviewer of the book puts it, "this book is not to be approached from our typical "dominant culture" perspective, but from the viewpoint of the overlooked and often unnamed people whose stories she tells. The book is not for the casual reader or faint-of-heart. McKenna selected Hebrew and Christian scripture stories to get the reader thinking like one of the poor, the not-counted, the forgotten-- and to take action, which may mean confronting the dominant culture rather than following it".

Without attempting to spark what may be perceived as the pithing of the legitimate concerns of black people against female legitimate concerns, I want to suggest that the celebration of Black History month arises out of a similar limited telling of the human story.

As a boy growing up in the Jamaican school system, I was not introduced to any Jamaican or Caribbean history throughout primary school, and it was not until Grade 12 in high school that I was introduced to Caribbean History. Even then, the way the important chapters in the history of the Caribbean, such as the history of slavery and its abolition were told, was from an imperialistic perspective.

Accordingly, we were taught that it was the zeal and compassion of British missionary and liberal political activists of English ancestry which brought about an end to this inhumanity. It took historian and politically astute Eric Williams, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, to tell the truth of the story. It was through his efforts, and others like him, that we have learnt of the significance of the resistance of our slave forebears, even in face of the most oppressive crushing of revolts, as well as the rise of cheaper sugar in the East Indies, which made slave-produced sugar of the Caribbean, and the plantocracy which undergirded it uncompetitive, and thus, losing the support of those who controlled governance in Britain.

Likewise, in telling the story of a black nation like Haiti, all the world seems to hear about is the poverty of Haiti, a people impoverished by the corruption of their leaders past and present, and therefore deserving only of pity. What you never hear about is the story of what plunged Haiti into poverty in the first place, namely, the price exacted by France from the people of Haiti for daring to free themselves from a state of chattel slavery, and to prevent armed invasion by that nation and an alliance of world powers of the day.

But should you dismiss the story of Caribbean black people as lacking in credibility, consider for a moment the way in which the story of European explorers has been told, as if they were the first explorers using knowledge of navigation that no other peoples possessed. It was interesting to read a little book, *Waves of God's Embrace*, written by a Polynesian bishop, Winston Halapua, a gift given to all who were present at the ACC -15 meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, in November 2012, and to read of the seafaring heritage of that people. Let me quote a section from that book:

“At a time parallel to that of the biblical Abraham who migrated with his extended family from Ur of the Chaldes to Canaan, the land promised to him by God, the ancient Polynesians also migrated across great tracts of water....The ancient Polynesians were the first tangata moana – Oceanic people. Moving from South-east Asia, as most scholars contend, they swept through the already populated islands of Melanesia and discovered new groups of islands, which are known now as New Caledonia, Vanuatu and

Fiji. Around 3,000 years ago, they moved in their canoes further east to Tonga and Samoa. Within the last 2,000 years there have been other movements including sailing north to Hawaii, south east to Tahiti and the Cook Islands and about 900 years ago south to Aotearoa”.

The writer continues by describing for us the vessels in which the people travelled those journeys:

“The double-hulled canoes provided more stability in the water than a single outrigger. They were fast. Polynesian voyaging canoes could slice through the waves at up to 20km an hour, covering 160 km on an average day, much faster than the European sailing ships still in use just over 200 years ago”.

Issues of race and ethnicity constitute a potential source of conflict and division when introduced in the public arena, the church being no exception. It is much easier to let the status quo with all its distortions and denials in relation to these issues prevail, rather than opening what is perceived to be a can of worms. The truth of the matter is that, while the affirmation of something like Black History month has its controversial dimensions, there is no wholeness of being and integrity for the human race without the truth about each race in relationship to others being told.

The experience which characterizes the history of the black race across the Western world, and indeed one may argue, across the continent of Africa today, following European expansionism of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is one written in the experience of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. And we are left today with the challenge of making sense of that story through our own eyes. The central paradigm of the Christian faith, the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus speaks to this issue of the triumph of divine goodness over the evil activities and intentions of human society. But perhaps an image which many of us recall most readily is that of Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt as recorded in Genesis 45.

In Genesis 45:1-15 we are introduced to a very emotional scene in the life of Joseph and his brothers led by Judah. For the third time in the narrative, Joseph weeps, except up to this point it has been in private and without his brothers’

knowledge and with his identity concealed. Now he reveals his identity, an identity of affinity and kinship. Not just any identity, but that of family. “I am Joseph (your brother); is my father still alive?”; pointing here to a common ancestry. Here is a moment of revelation and reconciliation. Both parties have to acknowledge what has been amiss in the relationship, in order that reconciliation can take place. The brothers are terrified because they know that they are in the hands of Joseph and fear what his retaliation would look like, and he in turn reminds them of the crime which they had committed against him. It is interesting how the one who has wronged the other can come to project their fears of retaliation from the one who has been wrong in proportion to the offence committed in the first place. So Joseph says, “I am Joseph, your brother whom you sold into Egypt”. In that moment there is an element of shock and incredulity. So glibly do we talk about “kissing/hugging and making up”, without realizing that the path to reconciliation is one which involves the acknowledgement of wrong and the naming of the things which have caused hurt and alienation. The paradigm being expressed here is that reconciliation and forgiveness begin with the naming of the wrongs/the hurts as a way to move forward.

Joseph continues his conversation with his brothers by providing a framework within which to understand what has happened in the past and what is guiding the process of relationship between the various parties in moving toward the future. For Joseph it is theological in focus. “It was for saving life that God sent me ahead of you”. Here is truly a voice of the Diaspora, victim of a movement began with the evil intent of the actors, and yet, even this evil is being put within the purview of God’s providential care.

Accordingly, I propose that while it was the evil intention of Europeans who created the migratory movements as well as ethnic decimation of the Tainos/Arawaks, the first nation peoples of Jamaica, which led to the creation of Jamaican society and various nations of the global south as we know them today, we must affirm that the existence of our nations as constituted today, and the composition of the black people of the Diaspora, is not just an accident merely of human creation, but that it stands within the providence and purpose of God for the lives of people who make up today’s Jamaica and today’s Diaspora. For Joseph, the providential care and governance of God was, not just for himself, but his

family also and the future generations. So he said, “It was for saving life that God sent me ahead of you”, and continued “God sent me ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant in the land and to preserve you alive as a great band of survivors”.

The Black race has not emerged from the experience of betrayal and slavery as “the rulers of Egypt”, as was the case for Joseph, but we have emerged out of an experience of chattel slavery by which we can now affirm who we are as persons and make our contribution to humanity which has so far denied our personhood and the value of our contribution to the definition of the wholeness of humanity. The reversal of centuries of negative influences cannot be erased within a few generations. It is a process and it takes time.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade represents one of the most violent, vicious and inhumane system of oppression and degradation ever experienced in human history. The direct physical form of violence which characterized slavery in the Caribbean has been well documented. What is still not fully acknowledged is the psychic violence which was directed at a people’s self-concept or self-esteem through the experience of chattel slavery. Violence in its various manifestations is damaging to the webs of meaning which individuals weave as a way of defining self.

Part of the way in which individuals are able to create a web of meaning is through the use of narratives. Narrative helps with defining the individual as a self and as a self in relation to other selves. In this way narratives are part of how individuals define themselves in their separateness but also in terms of their identity as part of community. Slavery/violence is an attack on our sense of self-hood and of safety. Those who inflict violence on others in its various forms, seek to produce in the lives of their victims what Robert Schreiter calls “**the narrative of the lie**”, that is, “to provide another narrative so that people will learn to live with and acquiesce to the will of the oppressor”. The observance of Black History Month is a way of reversing “the narrative of the lie”. And this unmasking process is one which the black race must do for itself, through doing what Bob Marley called “freeing ourselves from mental slavery”; empowering the black male who is still marginal and underachieving in many spheres, and who still needs to be more central to family life and child-rearing. It involves helping our black children to affirm their

worth in a world that can be deflating of their worth and their ambition, even while allowing them to see the rich history of African civilizations and the achievements and contributions of the black race in today's global environment. It means moving beyond the stereotype that blacks have particular gifts and abilities in sports and music, while at the same time subtly suggesting that there are no such endowments when it comes to matters of intellect, business, and contribution to the development of humanity. Likewise we must reject those notions which prevail even today that black culture is simply an exotic expression to be treated as novelty but not to be taken seriously.

But all of this cannot take place in a context of racial isolation. This brings me to the controversial issue of "Reparation", an issue with which I believe the Canadian Church has had to engage in recent years and which I believe brought much pain, and I hope, much healing. By "reparation" I mean "the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury". The celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade placed the issue back on the table in 2007, and it has not gone away. From my perspective reparation is and ought to be about much more than arriving at an appropriate monetary figure and the compensation for labour. It has to do with many intangibles including areas of human life, identity and worth which can never be adequately addressed by a fixed monetary compensation.

Now I must recognize that there are persons who take the position that slavery has long gone and we must forget about it and move on. At another level one must recognize that the European powers who were involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and whose economic development and industrialization were made possible by slave labour, have distanced themselves from any serious acknowledgement of the wrong done to the people who were enslaved in the Caribbean, even as they have the nerve to claim moral authority in calling for peoples of other hues and religions who have been subjected to any form of forced labour, oppression, and migration, to receive "reparation" in our day.

When we begin to talk about reparation we must understand that those who perpetrated slavery and had their nations develop on the blood, sweat, and tears of our forebears, will not be welcoming and accommodating of such arguments. It

would be naïve to believe that the motivation of the human heart, the notions of racial superiority, or theologies of divine election, which led to the enslavement of others, no longer exist.

Notice how Joseph's fate has been sealed in terms of the success which he achieved in Egypt in Pharaoh's kingdom, but his good fortune is not his to be protected in some kind of private world. Indeed, his fortune was tied up with that of his family, even in their misfortune. But the release of that fortune with all of its creative possibilities and hopes for the future could not become unleashed until there was an expression of repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness. So not only has God guided the way to this moment with all its success, but Joseph now sends his brothers to bring his father, Jacob, and all his family to settle in Egypt and to share in the bounty thereof. The sure sign of the reconciliation and restoration of fraternal bonds is evidenced in the embracing and kissing of each other. How hard it must have been for Joseph to have remembered all that his brothers did to him and still be gracious toward them. Consider all the lines that Joseph could have rehearsed in his mind about what he would say and do to his brothers if he ever laid eyes on them again. Consider what it must have been like to have power in your hands and wealth and prosperity and your disposal and now see those worthless vagabonds before you. Yet now, the relationship is being sealed with a kiss and an embrace. He further offers them gifts of garments which become an interesting play on the very symbol which had divided them in the first place, the "coat of many colours".

The observance of Black History Month is perceived by some as an occasion for settling scores in the manner in which I have suggested that Joseph could have nurtured against his brothers during his years of slavery and imprisonment. It is certainly natural for those who have been wronged to want to retaliate, but it is also true to say that those who have done the wrong, often project into the one who has been wronged their worst fears about retaliation for their actions. Perhaps no place has this been more evident than in the fall of apartheid in South Africa, and the extraordinary way in which Nelson Mandela offered leadership to the new South Africa. One paradigm for thinking about the issue of reparation and what it seeks to achieve from a Christian perspective is **reconciliation**. Reconciliation cannot be understood without coming to terms with violence and suffering.

Reparation then, from my perspective, involves a monetary transaction, but it is about much more than that. It has to do with the acknowledgement of wrong, the *healing* of the one who has been wronged, and the initiative of the one who has been wronged to restore the fractured and distorted relationship which has developed. Only certain people have the moral authority to issue the call for reconciliation, namely the victims of oppression. It is not enough for leaders of nations who were involved in the system of slavery to offer public apologies today. *Repentance* can originate from the side of those who have perpetrated violence, but *reconciliation* and *forgiveness* must come from the side of those who have suffered violence. Reparation will only be meaningful if it is recognized that payment does not restore the broken relationship. It is merely a tangible part of the process by which the enslaved and oppressed can experience healing and come to extend forgiveness to the oppressor, and to seek reconciliation where estrangement has prevailed. With reparation must also come the petition for forgiveness of those who have been wronged if reconciliation is to take place.

St. Paul helps us understand something of the reason why the engagement of issues of race and ethnicity cannot simply be for the Church and her members of the basis of national, cultural, or xenophobic considerations. In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul challenges and undercuts any definition of humanity which seeks to pith one group against another, by arguing that we are One in Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,<sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.<sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.<sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household,<sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of

the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.<sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.<sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In closing, I may have disappointed you by not using Black History Month as the opportunity to cite the achievements of the Black Race through the various African civilizations which have existed before the development of Europe, neither have I cited individual black persons of international renown and their contribution to the development of humanity. If the person designated the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States of America, is black, and has been the object of so many acts of indignity and racial attacks, never experienced by any of his predecessors, it is clear that there are still fundamental issues to be addressed concerning racial identity and inter-racial relations that pragmatic solutions which border on band-aid treatments and which do not bring humanity into closer relations, through the unmasking of the “narrative of the lie” and the experience of reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ, falls short of the wholeness and unity which God wills for God’s creation.

AMEN.