

Commemoration of Blessed Absalom Jones
Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 14, 2021

The Legacy of the Blessed Absalom Jones

“To arise out of the dust and shake ourselves, and throw off that servile fear, that the habit of oppression and bondage trained us up in. And in meekness and fear, we would desire to walk in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.” One month after the opening of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Absalom Jones offered these words as a response to the patronizing and paternalistic sermon on gratitude and humility preached by the white minister Samuel Magaw at the church's very first service. Absalom countered Magaw's words by stating clearly the reason for the establishment of the first black church in Philadelphia and in our young nation. His response echo Jesus' words from John's Gospel: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” A message of empowerment and hope to a people in bondage; and a belief that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ Jones and his fellow black siblings could worship, serve and dwell in freedom.

Five years prior to the founding of St. Thomas' Church, Jones and his friend Richard Allen, were praying with fellow worshippers at St. George's Methodist Church, the community where Jones and Allen were serving as lay preachers to its black congregants. They had unwittingly sat in a new gallery that had been reserved for white members only. Interrupting their time of prayer, one of the ushers asked them to leave the section immediately. Jones, Allen and the others finished their prayers and then walked out. Never to return again. During this time Jones and Allen had organized the Free African Society as a social, political and humanitarian organization helping widows and orphans and assisting in the relief of the sick. The establishment of The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas was an outgrowth of this justice work among the growing black citizens in Philadelphia; and out of a desire to create a community where people of African descent could worship freely. St. Thomas became the first black Episcopal Church in the nation and Jones, the first ordained priest of color, serving as its founding Rector.

We also know that in 1793 the yellow fever epidemic was ravaging the city of Philadelphia. Many white people fled to the countryside including some of our founding fathers. At the request of the revered Dr. Benjamin Rush, who mistakenly believed that people of color were not affected as severely by the fever, Jones and Allen mobilized the Black community to care for the sick and dying, risking their own lives to help those who had enslaved them. What an incredible witness to Jesus' way of love and his gospel of freedom for the oppressed, the lost and the least among us.

Jones was known as an earnest preacher, a powerful voice for the oppressed, and a faithful servant of Christ. He loved the people God had entrusted to his care. And he cherished nothing more than being a part of their lives and journeying with them into the wholeness and freedom that Christ had promised. At the heart of his vocation was that of a humble pastor.

There are beautiful paintings and stained-glass windows throughout St. Thomas' Church which tell their community's story and how it connects with God's story. My favorite image among them is the depiction of Jesus and the little children. I was immediately drawn to Jesus, black Jesus, a Jesus who is more authentic to the historical figure than the European images I grew up seeing. When I scanned the painting more carefully, I noticed that the children encircled around Jesus were nothing like the blond haired, blue eyed cherub-like ones depicted in many of our churches. There's children of all colors enfolded in Jesus' embrace. Right next to him, holding onto to his robe is a little girl of Asian descent who looks just like my daughter. How moving to see her visage within the biblical story.

The Rt. Rev. Carlye Hughes, Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, who preached yesterday in the Diocesan celebration of Absalom Jones' said, "We remember our spiritual ancestors so that we can remember who we are." How important it is for us in 2021 struggling not only amid the COVID virus, but the virus of racism which has plagued our nation since the days of Absalom Jones. Remembering our spiritual ancestors of African descent and Asian descent and Latinx descent, celebrating their lives and legacies alongside of the horrific injustices they faced at the hands of our white ancestors is a sacred act of remembrance. We cannot turn away anymore. We must face the truth of our history in order for us all to be free. To re-member is to make the body whole again.

Bishop Hughes also said in her sermon that, “We remember who we are so that we can remember who God is.” Gazing upon that painting in St. Thomas’ parish hall, I was captivated by black Jesus, as well as the brown and black children at his feet. Reclaiming and honoring the stories of our spiritual ancestors like Absalom Jones we embrace a vision of God and God’s kingdom that is far more expansive than we could imagine. If we are made in the image and likeness of God as we hear in the biblical narrative, then our God is as diverse as God’s people are. Jesus’ commandment to love one another calls us to recognize the divine beauty in those who differ most from us. Jesus’ commandment to love one another also calls us to confront the ways we fear the differences we see in each other, the ways we oppress our siblings in Christ and deprive them of their dignity as God’s beloved.

In the words of Presiding Bishop Curry who is continuing Absalom Jones’ legacy in our day, “Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God’s dream.” The kind of world we see through the eyes of blessed Absalom Jones and the people of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas who have taken on his mantle. The world that resembles black Jesus welcoming children of all hues to sit at his feet and be blessed. That’s God’s dream for us all.

Let us pray. “Creator of all people, in our amazing diversity of size, shape, color, and giftedness: guide us, by your grace, to recognize the beauty and fitness of all whom you have made in your own image. Give us gifts of humility and generosity of spirit to recognize in all people, the face of our Savior, Jesus, and to practice his commandment to “love one another,” toward the end of bringing harmony and peace among persons of all colors, origins, and abilities, for the sake of your Kingdom.” *Amen.*

- Prayer created by the Commission to End Racism of the Diocese of West Virginia