

ABSALOM JONES: A MODEL FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

preached at a service commemorating the life and witness of Absalom Jones
in Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford, Connecticut
Sunday, 10 February 1991

“And the Lord said to Moses: ‘Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward.’”
— Exodus 14:15

Since Absalom Jones was rescued from obscurity a few years ago, and was granted his rightful place in the church’s calendar, most of us are aware of the basic facts of his life. We know how in the year 1787, he, along with fellow black worshippers in the balcony of Saint George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia, were wrested to their feet, and told that they were no longer welcome to worship there. The problem was, perhaps, that blacks in that congregation had become too numerous and potentially too powerful. Then, as now, integration, it would appear, was deemed to be a desirable end only if blacks were in a decided and controllable minority.

One of Absalom’s friends was Richard Allen. After that incident, they continued as fellow preachers in the Free African Society that they had founded, but in 1794, they went their separate ways: Allen opted for the “plain” Methodism that he believed was more suitable to the temperament of black people, Jones decided to cast his lot with the Episcopalians. Allen later founded the A.M.E. Church, but Jones toughed it out in the white establishment. We know that he paid dearly for his choice: he spent 10 years in deacon’s orders, and was finally ordained priest in 1804, having been granted a dispensation from Latin and Greek, on the condition that he and the people of the congregation that he founded, Saint Thomas’, Philadelphia, would not be members of the convention of the Diocese of Pennsylvania.

Black Episcopalians are the spiritual sons and daughters of Absalom Jones, and have been among the victims of a racism, endemic in our society, that all too often finds a happy home even the bosom of holy mother church. But the stage was set long before Absalom Jones came along. In 1723, planters in Virginia, concerned about the status of slaves who had been baptized, since the baptismal rite made several references to the rather troublesome issue of freedom, wrote to their bishop — the bishop of London — for his erudite theological opinion on the matter, and this is what he wrote back:

Christianity, and the embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least alteration in civil property, or in any of the duties which belong to civil relations; but in all these respects, it continues persons just in the same state as it found them. The freedom which Christianity gives, is freedom from the bondage of sin and Satan, and from the dominion of men’s lust and passions and inordinate desires; but as to their outward

condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized, and becoming Christians, make no manner of change in it . . . and so far is Christianity from discharging men from the duties of the station and condition in which it found them, that it lays them under stronger obligation to perform those duties with the greatest diligence and fidelity.

And to bring things closer to home, early in this century, a committee of the Convention of the Diocese of New York, charged with considering the application of Saint Philip's Church in Harlem to be recognized by it, rendered this judgment:

But this cannot prevent our seeing the fact, that they are socially degraded, and are not regarded as proper associates for the class of persons who attend our convention. We object not to the color of their skin, but we question their possession of those qualities which would render their intercourse with members of a church convention useful, or agreeable, even to themselves . . . It is impossible, in the nature of things that such opposites should commingle with any pleasure or satisfaction to either.

And, on a personal note, I could tell you of my interview at the Berkeley Divinity School, in this diocese, 23 years ago, in which I was asked if it had ever occurred to me that the Episcopal Church didn't particularly like me. (I answered "no," by the way. I had grown up in St. Philip's Brooklyn, then the largest parish in the Diocese of Long Island, black or white. There were three black priests, and more than 2,000 black souls. For my entire childhood and early adolescence, the only white Episcopalian I ever saw was the Bishop of Long Island, when he came for confirmation once a year).

And so, it would appear, blacks in the Episcopal Church have earned the right to complain. But complaining, as someone once said, is like rocking in a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere. This afternoon, therefore, I would like to suggest that we look at Absalom Jones not as a symbol of victimization but as a model for self-determination; not as a casualty of the "system" but as one who ever provides for us a goodly example to follow. For Blessed Absalom was like the man who, when he found himself with a bushel of lemons, decided to make lemonade. And in many ways, this has been his legacy to the black church. It has traditionally bloomed where it was planted. It has, it can be argued, used a racist system to its advantage, and has been about the business of empowerment of its people, establishing great empires in places where blacks were sent to minister, because, quite simply, they had no place else to go.

Absalom Jones was an empire builder and a community organizer *par excellence*. He was not content just to establish a congregation where black folk could come on Sunday for divine worship. He did not hang around the sacristy folding corporals, waiting for the faithful to come

to the church's doors to be hatched, matched, and dispatched. But seeing the need for blacks to have an economic as well as a spiritual base in the community, he founded, along with Richard Allen, the first black insurance company, and acquired community real estate. Jones, who earlier had purchased his own freedom, recognized the importance of freedom for all blacks, and through the establishment of the Free African Society, he, again in collaboration with Richard Allen, effectively aided the emancipation of slaves and the protection of the rights of free blacks. Fully cognizant of the need to work through the political system, they petitioned Congress to free slaves 65 years before the Emancipation Proclamation. Not content that his message of self-help be heard only by those within his own congregation, Absalom Jones became a prolific writer, publishing pamphlets and leaflets promoting his several causes. And even when the great yellow fever epidemic struck Philadelphia it was Jones who organized the most effective nursing and burial teams, caring alike for black and white, fearlessly risking infection in places where others dared not tread.

Absalom Jones' blessed example was emulated by those who followed him in the priesthood — men like Peter Williams and his successors at Saint Philip's, Harlem; James Theodore Holly at Saint Luke's, New Haven, later founder and first bishop of the church in Haiti; Alexander Crummell of Saint Luke's, Washington, who founded the Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People, the precursor of the Union of Black Episcopalians; and George Freeman Bragg, who spent half a century at Saint James', Baltimore, and who was personally responsible for more than a score of vocations to the sacred ministry.

But I would put the question to you, What have we done lately? As I go about the country, visiting black congregations, I see that they are often hand-to-mouth institutions, making ends meet (if they are self-supporting at all), although their members are more than capable of providing a support base. I see at times an appalling lack of interest in the community, or a theology of outreach that defines it as "keeping others out of reach." I see demoralized clergy, and vestries who often, pathologically, want to keep them that way; I see tempest-in-a-teapot type internecine warfare between parish groups: this guild *vs.* that; cradle Episcopalians *vs.* converts; all of which practices slowly but surely eat away at the Body of Christ, and sap it of its energy to be a force for good in this sinful and broken world where we are called to preach the Gospel.

Lord knows, there are some bright signs on the horizon. Since I have been in the Office of Black Ministries (although, admittedly not necessarily because of that fact), no fewer than 10 black priests have been elected to the episcopate; black people now head three of the program units at the Episcopal Church Center, where nearly 25 percent of the appointed staff are black. A few years ago Carleton Hayden was named associated dean of the School of Theology at the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, an institution that a generation ago did not even *admit* black students. Lloyd Casson is vicar of Trinity Wall Street, reputedly the wealthiest parish in Christendom. Five out of 40 members of the Executive Council are black. But we

must not let these accomplishments blind us to the fact that all is not at ease in Zion at the grassroots level of the black church, where so many of our congregations are not self-supporting and many others are barely marginal; congregations that, it must be added, are not fostering vocations to the priesthood. Nor should we fall into the trap of seeking our respective places in the sun in the so-called higher echelons of the church's life, by attempting to by-pass the basic power base of this church, which, until something else comes along, is the rector and vestry of a parish. We cannot lay a hatchet to the root of the tree and expect the tree to flourish!

But despite all this, there is hope for the parish. In the 14th chapter of Exodus we read these words: "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward.'" The Lord spoke these words unto Moses at a time when the people of God, the Israelites, had lost heart. The Lord God had given them his master plan. They had escaped, but as we read in the Book of Exodus, "When Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid; and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord." And then comes perhaps the most sarcastic line in the Bible: "Were there no graves in Egypt that you have brought us away to perish in the wilderness?" And it is at this point that Moses assured his people that the Lord would fight for them. And the Lord said, "Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward." And he gave Moses the command to part the Red Sea, and the rest, my dear people, is history.

Black Episcopalians, sons and daughters of Absalom Jones, can and will go forward, but like the Jews of Egypt we need a plan. We need a plan to get through the Red Sea; we need a plan to survive in the desert. We will go forward when we realize that singing spirituals, clapping our hands, attending UBE conferences once a year, and keeping the feast of Absalom Jones, however laudable, worthy, and uplifting these activities may be, will not, in and of themselves, cut the mustard. We will go forward when we realize that the operative color in this church is neither black nor white but green. We will go forward when we understand what Shelton Hale Bishop meant when he said, "Saint Philip's is run by two books: the Prayer Book and the checkbook." We will go forward when we realize that money talks, no less on Cathedral Heights than on Wall Street.

If you do not understand parables, let me, like our Lord, tell you in plain Aramaic. It means that such demands as we make on the church will not be heeded if we continue to be a liability, and not an asset. We cannot, as Bishop Primo so aptly described it, go on buying what we want, while begging for what we need! If we are on the dole, if we are beholden to the diocese for our existence, we are dismissed. We have no friends at court. While we complain about the welfare recipients supported by our tax dollars, let us take a look at ourselves. So many of us exist because of the anonymous munificence of those parishes who pay their diocesan assessments.

We will go forward when we realize that a proliferation of badly-run fund-raising events is not a substitute for sacrificial giving.

We will go forward when we realize that we are no longer in the West Indies where the established church provided everything, and it was considered quite acceptable to bow to the collection plate as it passed.

We will go forward when we realize that we are no longer in some little congregation that the bishop or some great mother church has established to keep us separate but very much unequal.

We will go forward when we understand that there are more important things in the life of the church than the altar guild's bake sale, the ECW bazaar, or the Men's Club barbecue. While we are putting icing on the cupcakes, selling mother's discarded unwearable jewelry, and whipping up buckets of potato salad, the rest of the church is determining missionary policy, making decisions about where to invest the money you give in the collection plate, and are about the business, even now, not yet half-way through the term of the incumbent, of deciding who will be the next Presiding Bishop.

We will go forward when we learn that having a well-appointed church with a priest there from matins to evensong every day is not our baptismal right but a privilege — and a costly one. We will go forward when we learn to support and uphold our clergy, and no longer recite that silent vestryman's prayer: "Lord, you keep him humble, and we'll keep him poor."

We will go forward when we begin to take seriously the responsibility of raising up men and women for the ordained ministry of this church. While we rejoice at the number of persons, as the old Prayer Book used to call them, "of riper years" who are offering themselves for the diaconate and the priesthood, can we do nothing to inspire the young men and women — the boys and girls of our parishes — to at least consider the ordained ministry; who are willing to make this their life's work; who are willing, in the words of the old Prayer Book, to "cast all worldly cares aside, and dedicate themselves wholly to this one thing"?

I refuse to believe that our youth groups and our acolyte guilds have ceased to be the spawning grounds for future generations of priests. But clergy will be raised up from the ranks of our parishes not by osmosis, but by creating salubrious surroundings that will make the priesthood attractive; we will raise up priests from the ranks of our parishes when black clergy appear to all and sundry to be happy and fulfilled in their work (not embittered and sour) so as to commend the priesthood by word and example. Priests will come forward from our pews when middle-class black parents cease to discourage their children from "going into the church" because it doesn't pay adequately (a topic on which they are more than qualified to speak — because as members of the vestry they balk at providing their own rector with a living wage).

In short, my brothers and sisters, we will go forward when we learn, as Absalom Jones knew well, that freedom is not free. For as Absalom Jones worked for the privilege of removing his shackles, we must work to remove ours, which, though not of iron, are nevertheless just as real. They are shackles that imprison our minds, and that make us believe in the seven deadly words of the Episcopal Church: “We have always done it that way”; shackles of the mind that allow us to believe that the struggle is over and that we have arrived. (The struggle is not over, and we have not arrived. I watched reruns of “Eyes on the Prize” the other night, and lamented the fact that a generation after the valiant example of such people as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and James Meredith, racism continues to rear its ugly head, and we have spawned a generation often indifferent to, and worse, ignorant of the contributions of those civil rights pioneers.) They are shackles that imprison our hearts and cause us, as the First Epistle of John so aptly describes it, to shut up our bowels of compassion against our neighbors. They are the shackles that imprison our tongues and somehow prevent us from proclaiming that Jesus is Lord; that somehow prevent us from sharing our faith with others because, perhaps, we prefer to keep our congregations small and clubby. They are the shackles that imprison our purses, and prevent us from giving freely for the spread of Christ’s kingdom.

Let us be faithful to the spirit and the legacy of Blessed Absalom, a legacy of self-determination and pride. Let us build up our parishes and communities with the zeal and enthusiasm of a former age. Let us cross the Red Sea of ignorance, survive a desert of indifference, and claim and inhabit a new Promised Land!

“And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of God, that they go forward.’”