

AN AFRICAN WHO HELPED SHAPE OUR FAITH (The Ethiopian Eunuch)

(A Meditation for Black History Month)

There was a point in my life when I asked myself, “Why celebrate **Black History Month**? Later it occurred to me that history has been written from a biased and from a white perspective. It further occurred to me that not only is history biased, but the same can be said of the interpretation of Scripture, education, theology, geography and so many other disciplines. I must further point out that biases are very much alive and well in church leaders and congregations, educators, employers and the public at large. It is therefore necessary that the wrongs of history be righted and that the contributions of blacks and other civilizations be recognized and incorporated into the history, be it Canadian or world history. When the time comes that this kind of action is taken, there will be no more need to celebrate **Black History Month** as a separate entity, for history will then become, **everybody’s story**.

Let me test your knowledge for a moment. How many people here know that black people were in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus; that blacks were in Canada before the French and that it was Matthew Dacosta, an African-Canadian who interpreted the Micmac language to Samuel de Champlain and his party when they arrived in Quebec. Then, there is the case of Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary to the north pole. History however failed to mention the black explorer, and gives Peary all the credit. How about Oliver le Jeune who was taken from his village in Africa in 1628, at age 6. He was sold and resold many times, and given as a gift a couple of times. Oliver received his freedom in 1638 and went on to become the first Jesuit priest to be trained in Canada. How many people even realize that a goodly number of the early church fathers, for example; Turtullian, St Augustine, St Cyprian, to name a few were Africans? And, what of the many of the gadgets in and around our home and vicinity that we take for granted and on which we are so dependent? For example the refrigerator, washer and dryer, pressure cooker, egg-beater, stair-climbing wheelchair, lawn sprinkler, urinalysis machine, cellular phone, traffic lights, lubricators, fountain pen, street sweeper and a host of others that are black inventions. There were also some firsts. Dr Charles Drew established the first blood bank. The irony is that Dr. Drew died from a motor accident when a US hospital refused to give him blood. Also, Dr. Daniel Williams performed the first open-heart surgery.

So much for inventors, inventors and firsts: Let’s get to the subject at hand: **An African who helped to shape our faith**. Not too many years ago I was one of the workshop facilitators at the Ministers’ Conference at Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia. Bishop McKinley, one of the keynote speakers began his address by stating that on a visit to a museum in South Africa, he was surprised to see an old 5th or 6th century map on which the African continent was labeled as **Ethiopia**. He further pointed out that it was

the British who changed the name from Ethiopia to Africa. In fact, the ancient name for Africa was **Cush** (or Kush) named for Cush, one of the sons of Ham who began the establishment of the territory. It was the Greeks who changed the name of Africa from Cush to Ethiopia. The people were described by many writers as being “dark and handsome” and that they came from the ends of the known world. Isaiah, in chapter 11: 11, predicted that God would rescue the remnant of God’s people out of Cush. The psalmist sings in Psalm 68: 32, “let nobles come from Egypt, let Ethiopia extend its hands to God. The prophet Zephaniah defines his roots in the very first verse of Chapter 1 as being the son of Cush, and Luke uses the story of the Ethiopian eunuch to emphasize that “salvation is even to those who live in the farthest parts of the earth.”

Who was this Ethiopian eunuch? The first thing that probably comes to your mind is that since this man is a eunuch he must be a castrated male. Eunuchs were usually employed by kings and princes to guard their women’s quarters. But what some writers have failed to explain is that a eunuch is not necessarily a castrated male. Rather, the word **eunuch** can be a technical designation for a member of the royal court. It is not however impossible that the holder of this position could also be a castrated male. In this particular instance, the eunuch was the Ethiopian Finance Minister during the reign of Queen Candace. Queen Candace is sometimes referred to as **Kandake**. She too is African. This black African queen was not only very rich, but stood on equal footing with the great King Solomon. In addition to initiating trade links with and as a consultant to king Solomon, she bore Solomon a son, named Menelik, thus establishing the royal line down to the late Haile Selassie of present day Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian eunuch was no ordinary Joe. He was a man of great influence and stature. He was the finance minister. He traveled in his chariot to worship in the temple at Jerusalem. On his way back, Phillip the evangelist, directed by the Holy Spirit, met him and guide him in the interpretation of the passage of scripture he was reading from Isaiah. This man was an Ethiopian from Africa, not from Europe. According to Dr. Jeremiah Wright, “Here is an African who was not in the jungle chasing Tarzan, he was not a servant, a slave, the butler, or the chauffer driving Miss Daisy.” The Bible says, he was an African who was an important official. He was not driving a stolen car, or a rental car. He was riding in his own chariot. According to Luke, “he sat in his chariot and was reading. This man was highly educated. He was reading from the Greek Septuagint. As they would say in Trinidad “the man has education fo soh.” Wait a minute! This was fifteen hundred years before slavery. This was before David Livingstone. This was before Rome. This was before the missionary movement which claimed to enlighten the benighted people in the “dark continent.” How many times did we sing Reginald Heber’s Hymn, “From Greenland’s icy mountains, from India’s coral strand, Where Afric’s sunny fountains roll down their golden sand, from many an ancient river, from many a palmy plain, they call us to deliver their land from errors chain. Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high, can we to men benighted, the lamp of life deny?” Need I say more?

Lets get back to the Finance Minister. Tradition has it that after the eunuch’s encounter with Phillip, “he returned to his own country, his heart full of joy and peace, with a newborn and unquenchable enthusiasm to become the founder of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which through many and varied vicissitudes has continued to the present day.

Why did this brother make it his habit to go to the house of God? Think of the distance and the time it took for him to reach Jerusalem and back? He must have had an unsatisfying hunger for the word of God. While he traveled in his chariot, he was accomplishing his Bible study. For many of us, the church is central in our lives, especially in these days we face so many burdens and cares in our lives, that like Naude, the South African writer says, we feel like shouting to God, “stop the world, I want to get off.” Then we hear the invitation from Christ, **Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...and you shall find rest for you souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**

And as the hymn writer puts it; **Let him have your burdens now. When the load bears down so heavy that the weight is shown upon your brow, there's Sweet relief in knowing, the lord will make a way somehow.**

Some might remark, How is it I do not feel that relief? You know why? It is because some of us are so messed up. It is because some have come into the house of God so uptight that we find it difficult to release the tension. We cannot say “Amen” or ‘Praise the Lord!’ In fact some of us have left the church more uptight than when we came in. Sisters and brothers God cannot take our burdens if we refuse to let go of them.

Another truth I leave with you today is that the brother had a relationship. Many of us know about the saviour but we do not know the saviour. A person like that will give the impression he or she is “holier than thou”, but what about the skeleton in the closet? Jesus said quite emphatically (Matt: 7: 21), “Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven.” You may spend all your time praying and singing and even witnessing, but unless you have the right relationship with God and with one another, you are nothing but hot air. When you are firmly grounded in God, when you know the saviour personally, your faith is not a precept. It is all about following a person. It is about a relationship. It is like being in love. It is the real romance . You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul. You must go with Jesus all the way, even to Calvary.

Let us get back to the Ethiopian eunuch for a moment. Let's suppose that he was really an emasculated male. This man decided that nothing ; not even his handicap was going to come between him and God. Even though an emasculated male was not allowed beyond the court of the gentiles he was going to worship. Even if he could only look into the temple, he was going to worship. Even if he had to view the temple from the roof top or a nearby tree, he was going to worship. Come hell or high water, he was going to worship. Paul asks the question in Romans 8: 35-39:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or percussion, or famine, nakedness, or peril, or sword? No! In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any thing else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sisters and brothers, what confidence! The kind of confidence concerning our relationship with Christ can come to us only if we give ourselves to God in complete

surrender. I give all thanks and praise to Almighty God for the Ethiopian eunuch, for his steadfastness in helping to shape our faith, and for all the saints past and present who have also assisted us in the process. Amen!