

Our Past, Our Present and Our Future

Joshua 1: 1 – 24

Every person has a past. I am not referring to reincarnation, meaning that you have a past life in which you existed as someone or something else before you came into this life. What I am suggesting is the events that have taken place in the course of life as you know it or as you experience it today. However, the truth is that you are not the only individual person who has a past. Groups, communities, nations and cultures all have a past. We commonly refer the past as history and the simplest definition one can give to the word “history” is your story. What about her story, or his story, or their story, or our story?

If I were to ask you,

What is your story? You might begin at an exact or a particular point in your life. Some of you may want to go back as far as creation; others might begin with Columbus; still others might begin with their grandparents or great grandparents, while others might begin by simply stating, I was born at such and such a place at such and such time. It does not matter at which point you begin to relate your story. What matters is that at whatever point you begin, your story impinges upon your life in a certain way. It is the foundation upon which you build or live your present life and how you prepare for your future. The past therefore is fundamental in building our future.

Now! Where do Jamaicans begin their story? Some historians might begin with the native peoples; that is, the Arawaks and the Caribs. Majority however began with Columbus. Why? A little more than five hundred years ago, Columbus left Portugal to find India. He got lost in the process, ended up in the Americas, and the place has not been the same since.

As an aside, I must remind you that Columbus did not discover the Americas. To say such a thing or even to harbour the notion is preposterous, since there were already people living here when Columbus arrived. It has even been documented that there were even black African traders present among the native peoples, particularly in Hispaniola.

The native peoples that Columbus found in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica, could not be forced to be cogs in the economic wheel, so they were either killed, while others took their own lives. In order to keep the machinery going, black folk were uprooted from their land and families in parts of the African continent. They endured the notorious middle passage, where, under the most inhumane conditions, millions perished. Those who survived the middle passage were sold as property along with the cattle and other possessions. The slave trade was not restricted to the Spanish. The Portuguese, French, Dutch, British and Jews all had a gigantic role to play in slavery and the slave trade. Not only did the colonial masters raped the land of its wealth by using forced labour, but they imposed their religion and their culture as well.

Black folk began to rebel. They were not prepared to continue the harsh treatment any longer. Some took to the mountains. These were known as the maroons. They knew the terrain and were able to fight off the British and their ferocious hounds and their muskets. The British had no alternative but to make a treaty with them. Others under the leadership of Cudjoe, Nanny, Paul Bogle and others fought ferociously even setting fires to plantations and buildings. In 1834, slavery was abolished with an apprenticeship system put in place. Final abolition came in 1838.

Blacks now refused to work on the plantations, especially that each family received a plot of land. Some even inherited a few livestock. Since sugar was “king”, and being a great source of wealth for the plantocracy, they looked elsewhere for help on the plantations. Chinese were brought in but they did not take very well to plantation life. East Indians were brought in. During World War 1, a number of Germans were also settled in Jamaica. The white planters who started to intermix with the black women even during slavery certainly set a trend for those who followed. Thus, Jamaica became a potpourri of ethnic groups and cultures. It is no wonder then that in 1962 when Jamaica gained independence from Britain, **Out Of Many One People**, was chosen as its motto.

The writer of First Peter has a striking message that fits this situation. He writes, “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people.” The situation in our country today seem to defy that message, but I will not dwell on that. “Once you were no people.” .Slaves in Egypt not only made bricks without the straw as they did before, but the oppression increased. They were denied their identity and even relationships. According to Richard Synder, and I quote:

The identity they bore was given to them by the slave masters and it was an identity that made them nothing – no people. The very name **Hebrews**, signifies loss of specialness. It was a name given to various tribes who came from the geographic region across the Euphrates River.

God raised up Leaders, the chief being Moses to whom the responsibility was given to deliver God’s people from bondage in Egypt. But Moses led for only part of the journey. You might say that Moses was being punished because his leadership faltered, but I see it as God giving other capable leaders a chance to exercise their skills. This is where Joshua comes in.

Joshua is the leader for the next leg of the Journey. They came to the Jordan and as when they approach the Red Sea, the people began to ask; “How will we ever get across?” This was certainly a hazardous undertaking so the people began to panic. They had already forgotten that the same God who delivered them from bondage in Egypt and guided them with the cloud by day and the fire by night, is also able to get them safely over Jordan. When we face similar situations on our journey, this prayer from William Williams hymn is appropriate and can certainly be our prayer:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
Hold me with thy powerful hand...
When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell’s destruction,

Land me safe on Canaan's side.

As at the Red Sea, the waters were parted and the crossing accomplished. Twelve stones were taken from the bed of the river and were used to build a monument. Why? "When your children in the future will ask their fathers: 'what do these stones mean?' Then you must tell your children: 'On dry ground, Israel crossed over this Jordan. For the Lord, your God, dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord, your God, had done to the Red Sea which he dried up before us until we had crossed; so that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is strong, in order that you may fear the Lord your God all the days'".

Today, as we celebrate Jamaica's Independence, let us ask ourselves: How are we connected to our brothers and sisters at home. I see connectedness when we meet as groups and share school days stories. I see connectedness when we tell Annancy stories, tell riddles, sing our songs and play our music. I see connectedness when we read our literature, when we tell big boy stories or duppy stories; I see connectedness when we read our news papers and listen to Radio 601 on the internet; I see connectedness when we receive some fried fish and bammy, some east Indian or Julie mangoes, a roasted breadfruit among so many other stuff from those who visit home and listen to the news they relate to us upon their return. I could go on and on. Because, however you may look at it, we are still a community and do yearn to be there again even if it is but day dreaming. We feel this way because we have an identity with the country and the people we have left behind whether you be from the Caribbean, the Europe, Asia, wherever your roots are. We feel a certain kinship with Cecil A. Spring-Rice in the patriotic song, "I vow to thee my country." Listen to the words:

I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love
The love that asks no question, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar, the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

Here are two real life situations.

Juan and Maria are from Central America. They sneaked into the United States after a torturous journey to escape from the political dictatorship and imprisonment. They pretended to be Puerto Rican in order to pass as U.S. citizens and in order not to be deported.

Willie Loman, age 63, has tried for many years to be a successful salesman. Today he is without a job, without a purpose, without money, without close friends and more than all, without hope. In order to make up for what is lacking in his life, Loman resorts to delusion - "I average \$170 00 a week in sales: then to illusion that his son is not a thief and a drifter. Many of us are no different from Willie Loman. We deny the truth or reality of our situation. Or we are like Juan and Maria, who have to pretend to be who they are not in order to survive. Unlike so many of us they are without security or rights.

There is nothing basically wrong in being reminded of our past or for preparing and looking towards the future. These are important facets in determining who we are – our identity. It is important to keep our culture and traditions even when, at the same time,

we have acquired, and are acquiring new ones. It is also important that we teach them to our children, so that “when our children in the future will ask, what do these stones mean, we are able to enlighten them regarding their own history and background. We cannot and must not continue to be in the situation of Juan and Maria and deny who we are; or of Willie Loman, who is without hope because he continues to cling to his illusions and denials. Loman’s son tries to bring him back to reality by telling him, “No need to pretend. I am just what I am, that’s all.” Whenever we begin to face the reality of today, we are open to new possibilities. Then we can walk proud. For once we were no people, but now we are God’s people. Get up sisters and brothers. Walk down a different street with Jesus. In fact join in the dance and sing as you go hand in hand with the Lord... **God we praise you...we are your people.**

Amen!

Prepared by E Leicester Bigby
(for, Jamaica’s Independence Service)
Westminster United Church, August 7, 2005