

STONY THE ROAD WE TROD

(A Meditation for Black History Month)

I would like to thank the choir/congregation for their rendition of James Weldon Johnson's Hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. When Johnson wrote this hymn, little did he realise the impact it would have on congregations, groups and peoples across the globe, irrespective of ethnic origins. In the context of today's worship service, at the close of **Black History Month**, the third verse is particularly appealing as the introduction to prayer, or may be used all on its own. Listen to the words!

God of the weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light
Keep us forever in the path we pray
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God where we met thee
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world we forget thee,
Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.

According to Johnson, on the 12th of February (he did not say what year) some young men approached him and asked if he would write a poem in celebration of Lincoln's birthday. Nothing concrete came to his mind, so he gave up on the idea. However, the thought of writing the song for the occasion popped in his head. He discussed the idea with his brother, Rosamond, an accomplished musician, who hailed it as a very good idea. In addition, they planned to have it sung by a five hundred voice chorus of school children. I can just visualise what the Johnsons had in mind, since I have had the good fortune some years ago to listen to six hundred children singing, *Panis Angelicus* and *I Vow To Thee My Country* from the galleries of St. Andrews Scots Kirk, in Kingston, Jamaica. I truly felt then that I was in such a heavenly place caught up in a euphoric state of mind. Johnson said that the first line, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, came fairly easy, as were the lines at the end of the first stanza, "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past had taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us". It was at this point Johnson said that the spirit of the poem took hold of him. He managed to finish the stanza and handed it to his brother to write the music.

Johnson composed the other two stanzas while pacing back and forth on their front porch while his brother worked on the music. It was the last stanza however, that had the most profound effect on Johnson, who later remarked that he spoke at a Summer School at Bryn Mawr College and was surprised to hear his song fervently sung by the white students present. **But, continued Johnson, nothing I have done has paid me back so fully in satisfaction as being the part creator of this song. I am always thrilled deeply when I hear it sung. I am lifted up, carried back, and enabled to live through again the exquisite emotions I felt at the birth of the song.**

Verse four is a favourite of mine too, because to me it speaks of a journey. It does not matter to which cultural group we belong we are all part of the journey. The problem is however, that whether by deliberate omission or commission, when history is written it is done with a bias or completely ignoring the contribution by others on the journey.

Let me test your knowledge for a moment. How many of you know that black people were in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus; that black people were in Canada before the French and that it was Matthew Dacosta, an African-Canadian who interpreted the Micmac language to Samuel deChamplain 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 leJeune who was taken from his village in Africa, in 1628 at age six. He was sold and resold several 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 of us even realise that a number of the early church fathers, for example, Tertullian, St. Augustine and St Cyprian, to name a few were black Africans?

Here is another list that might be an eye-opener to many. The refrigerator, the washer and dryer, pressure cooker, stair climbing wheel chair, urine analysis machine, cellular phone, traffic lights, locomotive lubricators, fountain pen, street-sweeper are among the many black inventions. Dr. Charles Drew of McGill University established the first blood-bank. Ironically, Drew died from injuries in a motor accident when a US hospital refused to give him blood. Another black doctor, Daniel Williams performed the first open-heart surgery.

If history was properly integrated and less biased, there would not be the need for Black History Month. If we are not careful this February celebration could become a mere song and dance party instead of informing people, including black people, of the contribution and gifts blacks have given to society and to the world and not another form of segregation. Charlotte points out that the way to fix social ills is not through having months for everything. The way to fix social ills is to have those who suffer them define what needs to be done to solve them.

We must never forget that as a pilgrim people we are all on the journey together. We are all struggling together. We must never lose sight of the fact the world in which we live is like a

garden with many types of flowers, or a tapestry in which many colour threads are interwoven. In God's sight no one is less or more important than the other. Bible is crucial to our understanding of Christian forbearance. Whenever we think of ourselves as being superior to others, take a look at Jesus' genealogy narrative, popularly known as the "Begats" as set out in Matthew chapter one. Who were Jesus' ancestors? According to Matthew, Jesus bears a direct link to Ham through the following three women; Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba. Who were these three women? According to Genesis 38, Tamar was a Canaanite woman who bore a son with Judah, her father-in-law. The child was named Perez (Mat. 1:13). The story of Rahab is in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:17-25. Rahab was another Canaanite woman and a prostitute. She lived in Jericho. It was she who assisted the two spies sent by Joshua to survey the land of Canaan. Because of her hospitality, she and her household were spared when Jericho was destroyed. Both Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25, mention Rahab as a great woman of faith. Rahab had a son, Boaz, who according to Matthew 1:5, was one of the ancestors of Jesus. Who was Bathsheba? According to 2 Samuel 11, she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. King David got Uriah killed in order to take Uriah's wife. According to Genesis 10:15, and 23:10, the Hittites were a Hamitic people who descended from Heth, the son of Canaan. Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba, whom it is assumed shared the same ethnic origin with Uriah and according to Matthew 1:6, Bathsheba was an ancestor of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus' ancestry was neither perfect, nor blameless. Yet in spite of their imperfections, God used them as the vehicle through whom to send the Saviour of the world. I am so sorry for the people who think they are superior to all others; who make slavery of other people; devise schemes to divide and conquer others or who treat others as less than human. God has placed us on this earth to be good stewards. Not only are we supposed to take care of creation but to take care of one another as well. In the Proverbs passage, Wisdom which has been with God since creation admonishes not only the naïve and the fools, but all humankind. Wisdom beckons us to recognise God the creator and to work in the way of the Lord. "Stony, the road we trod" says James Weldon Johnson. Wisdom says the road may be rough and difficult, but with God it is safe. We have no alternative but to share in the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ...let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day, every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together....This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring. When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring in every village and hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro Spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

Let us pray!

God of the weary years, God of the silent tears,

Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;

Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light Keep us forever in the path we pray

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God where we met thee,

Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world we forget thee,

Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand,

true to our God, true to our native land.