

## **Juneteenth Sermon**

**By the Rev. Justin R. Cannon, rector**

I'd like to open by sharing with you a poem from *The Book of Poverty and Death* by Bohemian-Austrian poet, novelist, and mystic Rainer Maria Rilke. His poetry was often written as poems of devotion to God. This is *You are the poor one*, by Rainer Maria Rilke.

*You are the poor one, you the destitute.  
You are the stone that has no resting place.  
You are the diseased one  
whom we fear to touch.  
Only the wind is yours.*

*You are poor like the spring rain  
that gently caresses the city;  
like wishes muttered in a prison cell, without a world to hold them;  
and like the invalid, turning in his bed to ease the pain.  
Like flowers along the track, shuddering  
as the train roars by, and like the hand  
that covers our face when we cry - that poor.*

*Yours is the suffering of birds on freezing nights,  
of dogs who go hungry for days.  
Yours the long sad waiting of animals  
who are locked up and forgotten.*

*You are the beggar who averts his face,  
the homeless person who has given up asking;  
you howl in the storm.*

This radical identification of God with the lowly, the downcast, the forgotten is a core theme running like a vein of gold through the Gospels, through Jesus' ministry. It is magnified by the diversity of the downtrodden with whom Jesus spent his time—tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, handicapped, and disenfranchised of his day.

Today we commemorate Juneteenth, which was recognized as a feast day by our diocese at the last convention. For those who do not know the meaning of Juneteenth, Wikipedia sheds some light: “Originating in [Galveston, Texas](#), it has been celebrated annually on June 19 in various parts of the United States since 1865. The day was recognized as a federal holiday on June 17, 2021, when [President Joe Biden](#) signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law.<sup>[7][8]</sup> Juneteenth's commemoration is on the anniversary date of the June 19, 1865, announcement of [General Order No. 3](#) by [Union Army](#) general [Gordon Granger](#), proclaiming freedom for enslaved people in Texas,<sup>[9]</sup> which was the last state of the [Confederacy](#) with institutional slavery.”

You may be thinking, but wait, weren't slaves freed two years earlier with Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863? Well, not really. Although the Emancipation Proclamation brought an end to slavery in the Confederate States, it did not end slavery in states that remained in the Union. Those enslaved people were freed with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which on December 6, 1865 abolished slavery nationwide.

Speaking of slavery, the Psalm we heard today was a rather graphic psalm, the image of dashing the oppressors children against rocks being one of the more graphic images in the bible. This psalm is an expression of grief and anger, expressing the feelings of Israelites taken into captivity by the Babylonians. They had lost everything—the sacking of Jerusalem, pillaging of its temple, and a horrid and violent taking of an entire people into captivity. As one commentator explains, “Psalm 137 is the human response to that violence and struggle. It's a refusal to do what their captors want, a mourning of those caught in captivity and the expression of a desire for revenge. It is intensely human.” For African-Americans in this country, less than a hundred years ago the stories told to them by the parents and their parents' parents would not be dissimilar. Stories of captivity, violence, and devastation. I am speaking of the slave trade that plagued this land from before it founding until 1865.

All by a land that considered itself a nation of Christians. The truth of Christianity, however, is that it is a religion of liberation, founded on teachings of justice, mercy, and breaking the bonds of intolerance and oppression. We see this in the Song of Mary, which Mary sang before Jesus' birth:

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, \**  
*and has lifted up the lowly.*  
*He has filled the hungry with good things, \**  
*and the rich he has sent away empty.*

We see this message of liberation in the Song of Zechariah which he sang at the naming and circumcision of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin.

*This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, \**  
*to set us free from the hands of our enemies,*

But we see this most clearly in the Gospel lesson we heard today. It was so very carefully orchestrated by Jesus. Jesus was no stranger to utilizing dramatic effect. In today's Gospel lesson it says he went to the synagogue on the sabbath and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He slowly unrolls it, all eyes are on him. Dead silence. Now mind you, Hebrew does not have paragraph breaks, punctuation and the like so it takes a moment or two as he unrolls the scroll and searches for a specific scripture he wished to read. The Bible says, “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

**‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.**

**He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'  
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in  
the synagogue were fixed on him."**

This probably wasn't the scripture they expected to be read. The room is dead silent. Jesus is seated. And the scriptures say, "Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

He could have chosen any scripture. But this is what he chose:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

In reading this Jesus identifies himself as the anointed, the Messiah, and he identifies why he has come. Jesus was quite confrontational in his day of the powers that be—clashing with religious hypocrisy and confronting the injustices of the Roman empire, which occupied his people. He clashed with systems that oppressed people, religious and secular. Jesus' clash with the empire was clear to his followers. And ultimately Jesus' ministry led to his death at the hands of the empire. His followers understood the message of liberation that was the Good News. And they clashed with Rome, unwilling to relent in preaching this good news of equality—"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." And many of early disciples and early Christians died a martyr's death. They knew they stood in the lineage of the prophets who were calling God's people to justice and mercy, Jesus the Prophet of Prophets. And Jesus died the prophet's death just as many before him and many since.

The prophet Amos is another that we heard from in today's lessons. Amos, sharing the message from God, quotes the Lord as saying:

*I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*

*But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Justice! It is Justice God seeks. Bishop Oscar Romero, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic bishop in El Salvador, honored on the Episcopal calendar, once said, “A religion of Sunday mass but unjust weeks does not please the Lord.” He preached a Gospel of liberation and one quote of his speaks profoundly to this message: “A church that doesn’t provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?” Our faith is not here to make us feel comfortable and to ease our conscience—it is here to transform us and to transform this world. We cannot pray in the Lord’s Prayer for God’s Kingdom to come, here on earth as it is in heaven, if we are working in ways contrary to it—otherwise we are the worse kind of hypocrites, the kind with whom Jesus clashed.

I really like The Message’s rendering of the Amos passage. Now mind you, The Message is not a bible translation, but a rendering that seeks to capture a modern-day essence of what the scripture says. For Amos 5:21-24 it reads:

*“I can’t stand your religious meetings.  
I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions.  
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,  
your pretentious slogans and goals.  
I’m sick of your fund-raising schemes,  
your public relations and image making.  
I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?  
Do you know what I want?  
I want justice—oceans of it.  
I want fairness—rivers of it.  
That’s what I want. That’s all I want.*

Christianity is not just concerned with matters of social justice. Rather, Christianity is a commitment to confronting injustice. Jesus modeled this and clashed with an oppressive empire. His early followers continued in these footsteps facing tragic deaths. The first few hundred years of Christianity modeled a radical faith committed to the work of justice, mercy, and confronting the evil of its day. And then Constantine came up with a brilliant plan to squash this threatening movement—he made Christianity his bedfellow and neutered the faith, institutionalizing this previously radical movement and by-and-large Christianity has remained neutered for nearly 2000 years, complacent to patriarchy, misogyny, slavery, Crusades, consecrating countless wars, with great religious Bishops being bedfellows to the crown, even the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russian being beholden to the President of Russian to this day. Patriarch Kirill has angered many by echoing the language Putin uses to justify the Ukraine invasion, for example.

Christianity is a religion of the people, by the people, and for the people and the radical roots of our religion are being reclaimed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century since Christian came to earth. In March of

1965, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr had an essay published entitled “Let Justice Roll Down” in which he wrote:

“The fluidity and instability of American public opinion on questions of social change is very marked. There would have been no civil rights progress, nor a nuclear test-ban treaty, without resolute Presidential leadership. The issues which must be decided are momentous. The contest is not tranquil and relaxed. The search for a consensus will tend to become a quest for the least common denominator of change. In an atmosphere devoid of urgency the American people can easily be stupefied into accepting slow reform, which in practice would be inadequate reform. ‘Let Justice roll down like waters in a mighty stream,’ said the Prophet Amos. He was seeking not consensus but the cleansing action of revolutionary change. America has made progress toward freedom, but measured against the goal the road ahead is still long and hard.”

There is still great work before us, and may we work not for slow reform, but that “cleansing action of revolutionary change” of which King speaks. But there is one last piece of this equation.

As we work to break the chains of oppression in our own day, following the footsteps of Jesus the Christ, let us also remember that all oppressors are themselves slaves to fear, anger, bigotry and hatred. And let us remember that they too are our brother and sisters on a path towards redemption. Oscar Romero once said, “Peace is a product of justice, but justice is not enough. Love is also necessary. The love that makes us feel that we are brothers and sisters is properly what makes for true peace. Peace is the product of justice and love.” Caught in a network of interconnection and dependency, until we are all free, none of us is free. May we therefore continue the good work and continue to bring the good news. Together, may we seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.