



The Rev. Cn. Dr. Donald Kortright Davis

Sermon for Absalom Jones Celebration

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John 15:15: *“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing: but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”*

My Dear Friends, let me begin by asking three historic Afro-Anglican questions. *Why are we here? What are we doing here? Where do we go from here?* I say that they are historic simply because they were the basic questions that traditionally guided the designs, the deliberations, and the decision-making of the major historic assemblies of Black Anglicans globally for the past four decades. I refer, of course, to such assemblies as the first Afro-Anglican Conference in Barbados that produced the historic *Codrington Consensus* in 1985; or the Black Bishops’ meeting in Santo Domingo in 1990 that produced the historic pastoral letter *But We See Jesus*; or the Pre-Lambeth Afro-Anglican Conference at Cambridge University that issued the famous *Cambridge Declaration*, and which added much Ebony flavor to the conversations of the 1988 Lambeth Conference.

The three historic questions have had their traditional authors. For example, *Why are we here* was traditionally asked by the late Canon Fred Williams, or the late Bishop Walter Dennis. *What are we doing here* was traditionally asked by the late Canon Harold Lewis. *Where do we go from here* was traditionally asked by Canon

Donald Kortright Davis, who is thankfully still with us, as a ‘Him ancient and modern’! The initiatives that we took to generate change within Anglicanism, the documents that we produced for global conversations throughout Ecclesia Anglicana, and the struggles for equitable participation within the church culture and our congregations did not really begin with any of us.

They were rooted and grounded in a liberative reading and interpretation of Sacred Scripture. They have given rise to a radical and well-informed reversal of an upside-down conception of what it means to be fully human and unashamedly Black. They historically found meaning in the pioneering and courageous pursuit of a Messianic mystique of such spiritual ancestors as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. So today we are met to give thanks for the memory and legacy of Blessed Absalom Jones. As Jones and Allen sought to find a practical and realistic sense of the presence of a just and liberating God among the professing White Christians, whom God had blessed with Ivory Grace, they were asking themselves the same three questions to which I have just referred.

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen certainly embraced the Messianic Spirit of Blackness, and the spiritual embodiment of Ebony Grace, in the crucible of cruel bondage and social enslavement. But since they found themselves divinely appointed and anointed by the crises of their times, they struggled relentlessly to liberate and restore the socially disjointed. By the power of the Spirit, they managed their time and their resources well, to free themselves and their fellow Blacks from every possible yoke of oppression. They performed sacred magic with their Blackness to roll back the borders of ignorance, injustice, and exclusion, and to triumph over all the vestiges of fear and subjugation. They established for all time the mystique of Ebony Grace that would fan the flames of freedom, and break through the barriers to human progress, and create a wave of spiritual, moral, and cultural advancement. So,

here we are today, still rejoicing, still celebrating, and still feasting on their legacy and efficacy of divinely inspired Blackness.

It is one thing to claim the legacy of Ebony Grace, but it is another thing to manage and sustain it. It is one thing to proclaim the efficacy of Ebony Grace, but it is another thing to pro-create it. It is one thing to experience the mystique of Ebony Grace, but it is another thing to celebrate and expand it. The God who has blessed us with Ebony Grace has also blessed others through us. The Spirit of God neither has form nor substance, neither does the Grace of God have any schemes of merit, nor any graduating levels of heavenly reward. So, while it is right and good for us to celebrate what is unique about being Black, it is even more important for us to spare no effort in activating the gifts of Ebony Grace, with all their enervating and inter-cultural Magic, and moral Mystique, especially within the Church as the Community of Faith, as the Body of Christ.

This is what gives special meaning and spiritual thrust to our text for today: *“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing: but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”* What would this text have meant to Jones and Allen as they worshipped at St. George’s Methodist Church in 1791, with those three questions swimming around in their breasts? *Why are we here? What are we doing here? Where do we go from here?*

Here, where? They were open to the proclamation of Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They were not servants or enslaved any longer, as far as Jesus was concerned. They were friends of Jesus, who was himself the friend of all, regardless of their social status or ethnic and racial heritage. According to our text, the Fellowship of Jesus is to be a fellowship of friends, with the mutuality and a common identity that emerge from a relationship with that God whom Jesus called his “Father”. But we must also

notice that there is the reference to the “servant” and the “master”. Jesus said that there was usually a communication gap between the servant and the master. So, in that congregation in Philadelphia, there was a gathering of masters and servants, where, oddly enough, I want to believe that the servants knew more about the masters than the masters knew about the servants.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I stand before you as one who has always been blessed, pleased, and privileged to be a Christian first, and an Anglican next. My divinely inspired call to become who I am already is deeply rooted in my Afro-Anglican dispensation. Let me hasten to express my profound appreciation and gratitude to the organizers of this celebration, and particularly to the Bishop, the Dean, the Sub-Dean, and the Black Clergy Caucus, for the signal honor of inviting me to participate in this service today. I wish to assure you that this means a lot to me.

Our celebration today comes at a very critical time in our sojourn as followers and friends of Jesus Christ. The times are as anxious as they are urgent. The days are palpably evil, and the current crises are challenging. Our Ecclesiology itself is in turbulence. Our Eucharistic culture has been “pandemicized”. Our concepts of Mission and Ministry are under siege. Our Religious landscape has morphed into becoming a porous sandscape. The corridors of power have been overtaken by incredible notions of authority. Our national workplace is being overrun by chaotic uncertainty and increasing surges of social dysfunction. The grammar of our public discourse has been deluged by virulent clashes of democracy, meritocracy, oligarchy, tyranny, and injustice. The denial of compassion is increasingly becoming a social norm and a seemingly legitimate preference. Allow me to quote from the journalist Anne Applebaum of the *Atlantic*. She writes: *We,....exist in a permanent cacophony, where conflicting messages, right and left, true and false, flash across our screens all the time. Traditional religions are in long-term decline. Trusted institutions seem to be failing.*

Techno-optimism has given way to techno-pessimism, a fear that technology now controls us in ways we can't understand.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, it gives me no joy to offer this critique of the context and climate in which we find ourselves these days. Every generation has its own realities with which it must contend. This was the truth which sustained the momentum and the mystique by which Absalom Jones and his fellow leaders battled the evils of their day. It was a momentum that was strengthened by the triple moral forces of Truth, Trust, and Triumph. It was the power of Truth that hurt them in their experiences of racial oppression and human subjugation, while at the same time, it gave them the determination to confront and negate all the systems of social negation. It was their Trust in the righteous God, not the wrong god, that germinated the hope for a reincarnation of a Moses, or an Amos, or a Jesus, in the lives and struggles of men and women, boys and girls. They who heard the Word of God, believed that Word, and entrusted their whole selves towards the unrelenting pursuit of total freedom and full human dignity. It was their vision of the Triumph of love that gave them the fortitude to withstand all the surges of unlove and injustice, whether in the churches, or in the fields, or in the great houses. Somewhere, somehow, they recognized in their very souls that it was the love of God that made it imperative for them to love themselves for God's sake, and to instinctively resist any attempt by others to convince them otherwise.

We in our own generation seek to navigate our way through the maze of human aspirations, with visions of a better world and a more just society. We are striving with a more purposeful and dynamic advance towards the radical inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Where do we as Anglicans show up, and how do we seek to answer our own three Afro-Anglican questions at such a time as this?

First, *Why are we here?* I presume that the answer that most readily comes to mind is to be found in the sacramental mystery of our common baptism. We can

claim with very little hesitation, if any, that we all incorporate members of the Body of Christ --- One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. We are signed and sealed as virtual sharers in the Fellowship of the Spirit. We are proud participants in the Anglican witness to the message and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet, it is our struggle to live into this Anglican identity that has incessantly posed almost irreconcilable difficulties throughout our global ecclesial community. Locally, it can rightly be said that “All Episcopalians are Anglicans; but all Anglicans are not Episcopalians”. All Anglicans should be able to find and experience an ecclesial welcome in all Episcopalian spaces of worship, work, and witness. Indeed, the most prominent church-sign reads like this: *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You*. However, the cynical retort is sometimes heard to ask: “The Episcopal Church might welcome you, but will it speak to you?”

The pervasive demons of racism, classism, and xenophobia have continuously resisted all pretensions of sacred exorcism or social posturing, while the spectacle of some churches culturally divided as between masters and servants still seems to linger. This was painfully acknowledged most recently in the General Synod of the Mother Church of England in the final report of its Commission on Racial Injustice. The head of that Commission offered these remarks: *“There are all too many respects in which the Church of England today remains shaped by a theological and ecclesial imagination that enables those who do not experience racism themselves to downplay the cries of those who do and to deny that those cries are symptoms of deep and pervasive problems in our life together.”* It must be said, however, that in recent times the Episcopal Church has been making significant strides to eradicate such vestiges of discrimination, disparity, and racial injustice that have been evident throughout its congregational life and public witness. Much has been done in its efforts to deal with the myriads of these unwholesome and unholy historic maladies; but it must also be acknowledged, however, that national policies and resolutions at our diocesan

conventions do not often influence or alter the prejudices and appetites of our local congregational cultures. All church politics is local!

The second question is: *What are we doing here?* As we gather around this sacred altar to celebrate in Word and Sacrament the mysteries of the Jesus Story, we are forced to bring our own stories with us. Our stories are us. Our stories are the vehicles of our memories, our feelings and our fears, our prejudices and our pains, our strengths and our weaknesses. It is within the celebration of the Eucharist that we seek to rediscover our common identity as friends of Jesus. Here is where the Eucharist can become a collective form of protest against who we really are in our ordinary and diverse ways of life. The Anglican ethos of a tradition of masters and servants, of colonizers and colonized, of citizens and migrants, is emphatically confronted by the words of Jesus in our text for today. No longer are we called servants, as if there is to be any distinction between those who are servants and those who are masters. No, we are called to be friends with one Master, whom Jesus calls Father. It is this liturgy of communion, or *koinonia*, which makes the expression of a theology of friendship both possible and practical.

What are we doing here? We are trying to discover and discern what it means to be friends of Jesus, and friends of each other, with some sanctity and sincerity. We do this in the face of our differences and diverse circumstances. Let us never forget that there is a world of difference between 'friendliness' and 'friendship'. Friendliness is easy, it can always be displayed on demand. Friendship is costly, and it is not readily attained. Friendly faces may warm the heart, but it is the loving heart that creates the friend. So, what does the Church have to do with friendliness? Is it just to create a happy feeling, away from the surrounding unfriendliness and oppression in the world? The Church is not called to be just a friendly community; it is called to be a communion of friends of Jesus the Friend. Friendly communities may seek to

dominate the world; but the communion of the friends of Jesus must seek to save the world.

This is precisely why in our Eucharistic fellowship here in this cathedral today, we are enacting by sacred anamnesis the shed blood and broken body of Christ in a new covenantal assembly. This service is either a giant pantomime of dramatic pretense and sacred make-belief, or it is truly symbolic of who we would really wish to become. It is here that we can be set free from the cultural captivity of our own ethnicity, or class consciousness, or social-status symbols, or self-centeredness, or even our efforts of self-preservation and aggrandizement. Only then can we dare to become friends of Jesus, in that dynamic fellowship of those who can share a new covenant relationship with us. The New Covenant is here to be lived; it is not there to be mimed. After all, a Man gave his whole life to make it real, and it was a man blessed with Ebony Grace, Brother Simon of Cyrene, who helped him to carry his altar along the way, and up the hill, to Calvary.

Here comes my third question: *Where do we go from here?* Let us go to the next two verses that follow on from our text (verses 16 & 17). Jesus says: *You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.* As far as we Afro-Anglicans are concerned, it seems to me that the mandate is clear. We belong to a Church that belongs to God, and to no one else, regardless of its traditional impediments. We are to feel within our very souls the divine choosing, the divine appointing, the divine anointing, as well as the divine resourcing for the facing of these days. We are to become more fully enlisted in the Jesus Movement that is not only undergirded by the primacy of self-giving love, but it is also driven by the three Afro-Anglican lifestyles of Afro-Anglican Solidarity, Afro-Anglican Sociality, and Afro-Anglican Spirituality.

Where do we go from here? Our Afro-Anglican *Solidarity* must find full expression in the just demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all its emphases on radical Repentance, prudent Reparation, and courageous Reconciliation. Ours must be solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the structurally depressed and oppressed, the jobless, the homeless, and the hopeless. These are not labels, Dear friends; these are real persons for whom Jesus died.

Our Anglican vocabulary is replete with some very sweet-sounding phrases: “Via Media”, “Bonds of Mutual Affection”, “Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence - MRI”, “Partners in Mission”, “Five Marks of Mission”. Afro-Anglican Solidarity must generate some robust experiments to see if any of these phrases really have any bite within our Episcopalian culture, or if their toothlessness just needs to be honestly acknowledged. Solidarity around the altar of Christ is inextricably linked with the Gospel mandate of Jesus of Nazareth, and it demands a solidarity within the Great Commission of Christ. Let us never forget, that before we get to the Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel in Chapter 28, we are already commissioned with the Great Commandment of Love in Chapter 22. Afro-Anglican solidarity is to be a solidarity of resilient engagement with the Mission of the Gospel, with all its strange paradoxes and painful challenges. No Cross, No Crown!!

Where do we go from here? Our Afro-Anglican *Sociality* must be firmly committed towards the authentic and creative emergence of the Beloved Community, flavored with the beauties and blessings of Ebony Grace, and way beyond just singing “*Lift Every Voice and Sing*” every now and again. Furthermore, it must be rooted and grounded in our practical understanding of the nature and experience of our Triune God. This is what is known as the Divine economy, how God acts in our world. Just as we affirm the sociality within the Godhead – Father, Son, and Spirit – in a perfect dance of love and infinite mutuality, so we seek to live into

our own sociality as persons of faith created “AS” the Image of God, rather than “IN” the Image of God – the “Imago Dei”. Christians live out of this relationship with our Trinitarian God. *The God who creates is the God who redeems; and the God who redeems is the God who empowers --- Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.* God creates in “Diversity”, so we have the “D”. The Son of God redeems with Equity (“In Christ there is no East or West”), so we have our “E”. The Spirit of God traverses the whole of creation, without exclusion; so, the Spirit of God empowers “Inclusively”, and this gives us our “I”. To make the sign of the Cross, or to pronounce a Trinitarian blessing, or to sing the Doxology, is always to affirm our own DEI. We affirm it in our lives. We affirm it in our Church. We affirm it in our communities. We must work out our Afro-Anglican Sociality as Christians who are daily being created and re-created AS the IMAGO DEI. We are to become who we are already, for God is not finished with us yet.

Where do we go from here? We are to be led by the Spirit of God who guides us into all truth. It is Blessed St. Paul who reminds us that as many as are led by the Spirit of God they are indeed children of God, soldiers of Christ, paragons of love, agents of the transformed life, and channels of heavenly grace. All these virtuous ways of life are inherent in our *Afro-Anglican Spirituality*. Together they generate the strength and vitality of the four dimensions of our Afro-Anglican Spirituality. First, we must be enlivened by a Compassionate Heart. Second, we must be enlightened and engaged with a Collaborative Mind. Third, we must be fired up with the morality of Creative Imagination. Fourth, we must be impassioned by a Courageous Spirit. *Compassionate Heart, Collaborative Mind, Creative Imagination, and Courageous Spirit*, these are the four arrows in our Afro-Anglican quiver. Let us go forward from this sacred place to fight the good fight of Faith, with all our might.

Where do we go from here? Let me end with the pastoral exhortation and encouragement from our Afro-Anglican Bishops taken from the concluding words of their historic pastoral letter ***But We See Jesus***, some thirty-five years ago: *We urge you*

all to go forward firmly persuaded that the One who is with us is able to prevent us from falling, and to present us whole and free to the only wise and eternal God. Let us go forward with the firm assurance that God continues to bring light out of darkness. Let us continue to bring warmth, and compassion, and humanity, and feeling to American cultures. Though we sing “stony the road we trod” let not our souls be crushed, nor our spirits dimmed, nor our lips silenced, nor our efforts stilled. Let us go forward in faith and confidence, fully persuaded that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”. (Romans 8: 38-39). Thanks be to God.” AMEN.