

Homily for the Feast of Moses the Black
Tuesday, July 2, 2019
Association of Anglican Musicians Conference
Evensong at All Saints, Ashmont
The Reverend Peter Thompson
2 Chronicles 28:8-15; Luke 23:39-43

Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior.

Amen. (The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 7. For The Church, p. 816)

Psychologists have long known that human beings are prone to telling selective stories. Consider, for example, the psychological concept known as attribution bias, which highlights how the standards we use in evaluating our own behavior are different from the standards we use in evaluating the behavior of others. When we see a stranger do something wrong, we are likely to make judgments about that person's intrinsic character, but, when we do the same thing, we tend to think of ourselves as victims of unfortunate circumstances. If you cheat on your taxes, you are a liar and a thief; if I cheat on my taxes, I had a bad year and don't make too much money as a priest. It is far too easy for us to see the worst in others and the best in ourselves.

In church, we like neat narratives. They help us understand God and the world without any unnecessary complexity: God made Creation; human beings messed it up; Jesus came to save us; he died and rose again; and we all lived happily ever after. Yet these neat narratives leave a lot of important details out. My favorite oversimplification in the church is "love your neighbor as yourself. The rest is commentary." I always want to respond, "if love were that straightforward, we wouldn't need the commentary. But it seems like we need the commentary."

Every Easter Vigil, we glow with pride as we recount the Israelites' triumphant Exodus from Egypt. The poor, innocent, faithful Israelites, we tell ourselves, were mercilessly subjugated by the unquestionably evil Egyptians. We thank God for releasing Israel from the inhuman institution of slavery and for delivering it out of Egypt's hand. We do not, though, ponder the violent death suffered by the Egyptians, nor do we examine Israel's own complicated relationship with slavery. The patriarchs had slaves and even fathered children by them. The book of Leviticus includes extensive instructions about how to treat one's slaves that imply that slavery is perfectly acceptable. And hidden away in one short verse in the twenty eighth chapter of the second book of Chronicles, where almost no one will ever look, lies a piece of information that, if true, is astounding. Hundreds, if not thousands, of years after the Israelites had personally experienced the evils of slavery in Egypt, northern Israelites captured two hundred thousand women and children from southern Israel, also called Judah, intending to

make them slaves. Though a prophet hurriedly arrived to warn the northern Israelites to release the captives, some of the damage had already been done: Israelites, emancipated from slavery so many years before, aware of just how cruel and demeaning and devastating slavery could be, had demonstrated their willingness to enslave women and children from their own people. Why is it that during the Easter Vigil we tell the story of the Exodus and not this one? Tonight we commemorate the feast of Moses the Black, a fourth-century monk lauded for his humility and self-discipline. Initially the slave of an Egyptian government official, Moses became so irritating to his master that his master freed him. Once released, Moses wandered the countryside, committing robberies and murders until he decided to change his life and enter a monastic community in lower Egypt.

The official Episcopal Church biography of Moses, in the 2018 edition of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, summarizes this journey, describes Moses' martyrdom, and relates several charming anecdotes about Moses' time in the monastery. However, the biography, like many other summaries of Moses' life, is a markedly sanitized one that sidesteps a crucial detail: Moses' race. The title of the biography is "Moses the Black," and the text of the biography does refer to a primary source that describes Moses as "black of body." Yet the biography seems to suggest that Moses is a notable, prominent, capable monk who simply happens to be black. His race, we might reasonably deduce, is relatively unimportant, an almost meaningless physical detail. But this is not true.

The historical sources make clear that Moses faced prejudice, discrimination, and ridicule because he was black. Some of the stories about Moses are chilling. In one, Moses' fellow monks ask, "Why has this Ethiopian come into our midst?" using a term that at the time was understood to be a derogatory epithet. Moses maintains his silence until most of the monks leave, when a monk who remains asks Moses if he had been troubled by the comment. Moses tells the monk that he was troubled but indicates that he was unable or unwilling to say anything, and one is left to wonder what Moses would have said.

Another story takes place during Moses' ordination. At a moment in the liturgy just after Moses is clothed in a white tunic, the archbishop says to Moses, "Behold, you have become completely white, Father Moses." Moses responds, "Indeed, the outside O Lord Father; would that the inside were also white!"

In one final story, the archbishop tells the other monks to drive Moses out of the sanctuary. Hence, when Moses enters, the monks greet him by exclaiming, "Go away, Ethiopian"—again using a derogatory epithet. Moses accedes to their demands. While departing, he delivers a line that completely breaks my heart: "Rightly have they treated you, ash skin, Black one. As you are not a human, why should you come among humans?"

These narratives are alarming because they reveal not just the appallingly racist behavior that Moses was subject to but also how deeply he internalized the racist perspectives of others. More troubling still, the Church has, over the centuries, consistently praised his self-abasement, holding it up as a model for others to follow. Less than two decades ago, three years into the

twenty first century, a leading British scholar of desert monasticism described Moses as “one of the most revered of the hermits...a warm and loving man. The affection in which he was held was expressed at times by teasing him about the colour of his skin; he returned these comments with no resentment but with good humour.” The scholar’s brief description deliberately minimizes the import of Moses’ experience and remains resolutely focused on the virtue of the victim rather than the horror of the crime. But at least the scholar mentions the behavior of Moses’ fellow monks. Some modern treatments of Moses, like the Episcopal Church’s official biography of him, deal with the racism Moses faced by ignoring it, by pretending it never happened at all.

I’m guessing that the Church has largely avoided an honest reckoning with the life of Moses because admitting that Moses faced racism would require acknowledging just how endemic and systemic ecclesiastical racism really is. The story of Moses the Black, when it is fully told, shows us that racism has persisted within the Church for at least sixteen hundred years. Racism in the Church, it suggests, is not an accidental vestige of the Church’s alliance with American or even Western culture. Whatever Jesus may have said about loving your neighbor as yourself, whatever Paul may have written about there being neither Greek nor Jew, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, racism is woven into the Church’s fabric—both figuratively and literally. After all, don’t we still cover our cassocks with white surplices that represent purity, innocence and holiness? During Christmas and Easter, don’t we don white chasubles and put up white frontals, showcasing the most gleaming of colors for the most celebratory days of the year? Don’t we regularly pray at Evensongs for God to “lighten our darkness”? What part of the Church has been left untouched by the white male gaze?

I myself have loved the Anglican tradition since my days as a chorister at Washington National Cathedral. My favorite hymn is “Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest.” Parry and Stanford and Samuel Sebastian Wesley often make appearances in my Spotify playlists. I can tell you all about the second verse of Balfour Gardiner’s Evening Hymn and the Gloria Patri in Howells’ Coll Reg Evening Service. Singing in choirs, both as a child and as an adult, taught me leadership and the value of hard work and gave me an appreciation for the beauty of the transcendent, for the wonders that were possible when I made music with others in community, when I reached beyond myself. I don’t think I need to be convinced of the worth or the significance of the tradition we share.

And when it comes to resisting injustice and oppression in the Church, I’m hardly one to talk. As a younger person, I opposed tinkering with the lectionary to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I denounced what I called “political preaching” because, I said, it had nothing to do with the Gospel. I resented even token gestures towards racial equality, seeing them as evidence of “white guilt.” I changed pronouns back when they had been altered within hymns or the rest of the liturgy. I confidently proclaimed that all male choirs were superior by definition. But as a parish priest responsible for the wellbeing of a whole congregation, I have become far more sensitive to the ways in which liturgy and music can relegate people of color, women, and others to the fringes. Learning from the larger culture as it has changed around me, I have begun to come to terms with my own racism, misogyny, transphobia, classism, and ableism,

and I have discovered connections, however slight, between my own experience as a gay man and the experiences of other marginalized people. I now routinely bristle at how white and how male the Church can be, and I can no longer ignore the dramatic disparities that too often exist at our altars, in our pews, in our choir stalls, on our organ benches, and on our music lists. At least for Episcopalians, these disparities seem to be even greater in the church music world than in the wider Church. In the past two years, five black women have been elected diocesan bishops in the Episcopal Church and just this week a black woman was appointed bishop in the Church of England. But how many black women run major choral programs in our churches? How many black female composers appear on our music lists? How many black women even sing in our choirs? For reasons both conscious and unconscious, in ways both subtle and clear, on a systemic level as well as an individual one, sometimes without uttering even a single hateful word, the rest of us keep telling women, people of color, and others to go away, or maybe we never even invite them in at all.

I wonder what it might be like for us, especially those of us who are white cisgender men, to tell a more complete story of the Anglican tradition—to talk not only about Cranmer’s liturgical genius, the splendor of our great cathedrals, and the enormous impact that singing in a choir can have on a young person’s life, but also about all those who have been cast down and left out by the church we call home: the slaves who were advised by clergy to be obedient; the native peoples who were conquered in Christ’s name; the worshippers who were turned away at the church’s door; the women, the people of color, and the queer and trans folks whose experiences, all too often, are still not valued and whose voices, far too frequently, are still not heard. Facing the full reality of who we are and what we have done is sobering for sure, but it also empowers us to recognize how we have erred, to contemplate what we can do differently, and to imagine a new path forward.

In tonight’s reading from Luke’s Passion Narrative, one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus takes responsibility for his misdeeds and turns towards Jesus, placing his fate in Jesus’ hands. Societal depictions of criminals teach us that they rob and murder, that they come from the lower rungs of society, that they typically have darker skin—in short, that they are an awful lot like Moses the Black. But maybe the criminals really in need of repentance and conversion of heart are a little more like—well, me: people with privilege and power who don’t always realize the privilege and power that they have; people with their own faults and limitations who, at their weakest, ridicule those they do not understand; people who, when they’re not careful, worship the white Anglo-Saxon patriarchy rather than Jesus Christ. For those of us who fit into this category, the good news is that Christ stands right beside us, ready to forgive our mistakes, eager to embrace us despite our flaws, yearning to welcome us into the heavenly joys—if we are willing to acknowledge our shortcomings, to admit that we were wrong, to turn towards others, to change our ways. The question is whether we can find the strength and the courage to do so.

Holy Moses, pray for us. Amen.