



Reflection for February 10, 2021

The Feast of Absalom Jones (transferred) [1746-1818]

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

[Isaiah :1]

Born a house slave, Absalom Jones lived on the cusp of our country's paradoxical heritage as a land of freedom on the one hand and a slaveholding economy on the other. Born a house slave, at the age of twenty he married a slave and later purchased both her freedom and his own. He was a leader confronting the church with its own inconsistencies in segregating Black members on the one hand and in advocating abolition of slavery on the other. He became a leader in the formation of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, which was admitted to the Episcopal Diocese of Philadelphia in 1794; he was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in 1802 and served at St. Thomas until his death in 1818. Jones was known for his passionate preaching, and for his attentive pastoral care for the members of his church.

Absalom Jones served as a priest during the first generation of the Episcopal Church, and his passionate reminder that true freedom is grounded in community, not in individual entitlement, remains at the core of our mission and identity. His theology is a distinctively American liberation theology, articulated perhaps most clearly in the sermon he delivered on January 1, 1808:

The history of the world shows us, that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage, is not the only instance, in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name. He is as unchangeable in his nature and character, as he is in his wisdom and power. . . . He has seen the affliction of our countrymen, with an eye of pity. He has seen the wicked arts, by which wars have been fomented among the different tribes of the Africans, in order to procure captives, for the purpose of selling them for slaves. He has seen ships fitted out from different ports in Europe and America, and freighted with trinkets to be exchanged for the bodies and souls of men. He has seen the anguish which has taken place, when parents have been torn from their children, and children from their parents, and conveyed, with their hands and feet bound in fetters, on board of ships prepared to receive them. . . . He has seen them exposed for sale, like horses and cattle, upon the wharves; or, like bales of goods, in warehouses of West India and American seaports. He has seen the pangs of separation between members of the same family. He has seen them driven into the sugar; the rice, and the tobacco fields, and compelled to work--in spite of the habits of ease which they derived from the natural fertility of their own country in the open air, beneath a burning sun, with scarcely as much clothing upon them as modesty required. . . . He has seen them return to their smoky huts in the evening, with nothing to satisfy their hunger but a scanty allowance of roots; and these, cultivated for themselves, on that day only, which God ordained as a day of rest for man and beast. He has seen the neglect with which their masters have treated their immortal souls; not only in withholding religious instruction from them, but, in some instances, depriving them of access to the means of obtaining it. . . .