

*Keynote Address by Senator The Rev Canon Dr John Rogers,
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Truth Telling in Sacred Spaces

Southwark Cathedral

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I first wish to thank Bishop Rosemarie and the planning team for this gathering today for the gracious invitation to share with you as your keynote speaker. The theme chosen for this gathering is profound and indicative of the paradox with which the church finds itself confronted in the light of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Chattel Slavery. It ought to be a given that if nowhere else, truth should be told in Sacred Spaces. However, our theme whether intentional or not may allude to the truth that it has not always been so.

The last time I had the opportunity to speak on the theme of Truth-Telling, in Liverpool, I did so against the backdrop of “Debridement as an epithet for Truth-Telling” meaning that truth-telling regarding the transatlantic slave trade and ultimately chattel slavery in the West Indies and the Americas, is one that can evoke great feelings of anger, pain, hurt, and resentment. Those emotional and psychological symptoms may well mirror the process of debridement in the medical field, which involves the excision of dead and decaying material from a wound so that it may heal. So too, in our truth-telling process, we must debride so that there can be healing. For true healing to occur, we must deal with all the intricate details of the past, all those things that have been covered with the hope that they do not come to the fore at some point in time. Those things that have and still cause hurt and the denigration of people in our world. Truth-telling must now unearth those things; and where better to do so than in a sacred space.

Today, as we engage in truth-telling in this sacred space, I want to do so against the backdrop of the theme: *“Truth-telling- Repenting the Sins of Omission”*, which really speaks to what has been happening in the sacred spaces around the world concerning the issues of the Transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. However, in order to do this, I wish for us to cast our minds back to where it all began...Let us for a brief moment go back to first principles.

On what grounds did people feel it was okay to go and pull people from their homes in Africa and to take them to other parts of the world, to work them in many instances to death to fill the coffers of their European nation? When we go back to the root of this mindset we encounter the Portuguese. It was the Portuguese who first started in the trading of African slaves. Their premise was that the Africans were converts to Islam and therefore enemies of Christianity, so it was fair game. The Spanish then expanded on this by asserting that slavery was the due paid by Africans to Europeans for converting them to Christianity. Hanging on such a slender thread, the Spanish sought further justification for the enslavement of Africans. Thus, they delved into Holy Scripture and identified the passage in Genesis 9:22-27 as a good basis for developing a reason for the enslavement of the African people. In this account, Ham, Noah's son, who after the flood violated his father by uncovering his nakedness, was cursed to be subject to his brothers for the rest of his life.

A Portuguese writer by the name of Eans de Zurara then extended the premise initiated by the Spaniards beyond subjection to their brother to subjection to other races. It is against this Biblical premise that the transatlantic slave trade flourished in earnest. It was deemed to be acceptable that the black race is meant to work for their brothers for the rest of their life and must be subject to their brothers.

This then provided the fodder which all other European nations would use as the backdrop and the premise for the trafficking of African slaves. Of course, at the end of it all, it was the British who came out as the greatest beneficiaries of the slave trade...Britannia did rule the waves!

But what caused the need for these African slaves?

Well, having decimated the indigenous populations of the Caribbean and the Americas, the European powers needed a new workforce to do their bidding in the region to provide the monies for their coffers in Europe. It was opined that one African could do the work of ten Indians. With the premise already deeply grounded in the Bible, thus flourished the slave trade. The slave trade was harrowing, and the middle passage was harrowing. We know all the results, and we need not regurgitate that at this time.

However, I want to fast-forward to the intricate role of the church, particularly the Church of England, in the slave trade and more so in chattel slavery within the region. Once the European powers went to the West Indies, their religious institutions also journeyed with them. Missionaries were sent initially to maintain the faith of the Europeans but later on to seek to convert the Africans to the Christian faith. The instructions to the missionaries by the various missionary organizations do not hide the intent of those religious organizations, including the church of England.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
(SPG)Instructions to Missionaries:

One key instruction was that “The Missionary shall take special Care to give no Offence to the Civil Government, by intermeddling in Affairs not relating to their own Calling and Function.”

From very early, the position of the SPG concerning the instruction of slaves and any fears that may have existed that conversion would make them free, was expounded by William Fleetwood the bishop of St. Asaph at St. Mary le Bow in 1711 (2000 copies of this sermon were sent to the West Indies). According to Titus, Bishop Fleetwood:

“Denounced the slave owners who would not permit their slaves to be instructed in religion and be baptized. He also discussed the objections of slave owners which he refutes at length: that baptism would make slaves free; he cited St. Paul, Law of Christ, and Law of England that negroes would still be slaves after baptism. “If therefore it be lawful in our country to have or keep any slaves at all, it is, equally lawful to have or keep them so, though they are Christians.”

In 1726 a Missionary on the Codrington estates wrote that he deemed the conversion of negroes an impossibility.

Just for comparison let us look at instructions from another denomination, the Moravians.

According to Spangenberg in his assessment of Moravian Missions:

The whole spirit of the Moravian mission in the West Indies was to work within the framework of society as they found it, not to change it. Zinzendorf writing in 1793 to the slaves in St. Thomas, urged them to be faithful to their masters: God had appointed some to be masters and others to be slaves; “Let us not demand to quit the positions he has sent us to”. (A.G. Spangenberg 1788, *Account of the Manner in which the Protestant Church of the Unitas Fratrū Carry on Missions* p.43)

It should come as no surprise that in the wake of the 1816 revolt in Barbados, the Moravians we assert that they taught their slaves “fidelity and obedience to their masters and Governors, and to preserve them from the fatal effects of those pernicious principles which have lately been the ruin of many a neighbouring island” (Antigua Gazette, Jan 3, 1782).

The idea of the planters that Christianising or educating the slaves in any way would make them aspire to equality and improvement of their lot – surely a very real supposition-was rejected always by Moravians (N. Titus, *Reading in Caribbean Church History Vol.1*, p.329

But let us not fool ourselves that this was some altruistic exercise. Indeed, what the instructions to the missionaries are now telling us is that these missionaries were given specific instructions, that they were going to the region but when they go there they were not to interfere with the political system, they were to preach to the infidels and the savages and get them to be removed from the sin which covers them to bring them into heaven. And so, the role of Missionaries and ultimately the Church of England throughout the two hundred years of slavery leading up to emancipation, was not to upset the proverbial apple cart.

Their mission was seemingly to engage in the sin of omission. It was never to transform the status quo of the brutality that was being meted out to the African slaves. It was simply to tell them about heaven and how sinful they were, and

they needed to change so that they can get to this heaven while enduring hell on earth!

In light of this truth, the Church of England must confront itself because underlying all of this, there is one truth that has probably never been told. It may have been reflected upon; we have a copy of the slave Bible in the exhibition today in the South Transept here at Southwark Cathedral. That is a clear allusion to some things being omitted from the text. However, the sin of omission being reflected upon here goes much deeper than the omission of words. It is about the deliberate distortion of the Gospel in every facet of the lives of the oppressed. This truth has not been told in its fullness. The truth is that for the two hundred years of chattel slavery in the West Indies before the abolition of slavery in 1834, the gospel was never preached in its fullness. It was determined that the gospel was never to be preached in its fullness. The Church of England engaged in the sin of omission. Of course I am generalizing here, there may have been one or two who were very faithful to their calling. But what I mean is that if you were not intent on troubling the status quo, if you were to maintain what was taking place within the country and what was being meted out to the Africans, there is no possible way that you could have been preaching the gospel of Christ!

It was our Lord who, according to the Gospel of St. Luke tells us in Luke chapter 4 and verse eighteen, began His ministry in a very specific way. It began with Jesus going into the synagogue as was his custom on the Sabbath Day and the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was given to him, and he opened the scroll and then found where it was written. This passage is very deliberate in the message it seeks to convey. Jesus searched for that particular portion of scripture. It was not chosen for Him; He chose it himself. (It was not as though it was the lectionary reading for the day!) Jesus picked it out.

It turned out to be Isaiah 61:1-3. Luke records:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19).

This is how Jesus began his ministry. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of liberation and that could not be embraced in our region for over two hundred years because the missionaries were told to maintain the status quo. "Do not trouble the political system". If you are not trouble in the political system, let us engage in truth-telling and accept that in those sacred spaces within the region, the Church of England determined that the Gospel was not to be preached. As I said before, it is a generalization, but it is a generalization which makes a specific point and as much as there was no mission and a determination not to deal with the physical hardships which the slaves were experiencing then there was also a determination not to preach the gospel. There was a determination to engage in the sin of omission.

Even beyond the instructions to the missionaries and the church's determination to carry them out to the letter, Barbados presents an even more peculiar case. As I would have pointed out in another discourse, in Barbados in particular, in 1661 a law was passed called "The Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes" or The Slave Code. This law was introduced in response to the burgeoning population of Africans of the island. The slave code was the first piece of legislation in the world that recognized the Africans as less than human. That

was done in Barbados. It suggested that “we will protect them [slaves] as we do men’s other goods and Chattels.”

The African slaves became reduced to the level of chattel; the property of their slave owners and ultimately anything they did, anything they produced, anything they invented would not be recognized as theirs but would be recognized as that of the slave owner because they were not fully human according to the slave law. For much of the 17th and 18th centuries, the doors of the Church of England were closed to Africans. In Barbados, across from the Cathedral of St. Michaels and All Angels, there is a gap called “Amen Alley.” It is believed that it was where the slaves stood waiting for their masters who attended service at the Cathedral. Lore has it that when the service was finished, they collectively said ‘Amen.’ (I do not know if it was “Amen, let it be so, good service” or “Amen, thank God it’s over”!)

Coincidentally, about 20 years after the slave code was passed, the Bishop of London, Henry Compton was busy jostling with the Governments in the region for better conditions for clergy who were dependent on the Governor and planters for their stipends and control of church finances and affairs. This saw priests having a seat on the vestry. So, while the Africans were being reduced to the level of chattel, the Church of England was busy fighting the Government over finances. This would have been a noble thing had they been working to better the conditions of the African slaves, but the instructions they were given and to which they slavishly adhered, would tell us that was not the case. They were not to trouble the status quo. Thus, not only were the slaves deprived of the gospel of liberation preached to them, but the planters were spared of the admonition which holy scripture ascribes to those who illtreat others. I am sure the planters never heard the rebuke of missionaries who received the stern commission of St. Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 and verse two, which says:

“Preach the word. Be urgent in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and careful instruction. I believe very few planters would have experienced this when they attended church. On both sides, the church engaged in the sin of omission.

To compound the problem in 1681 the Barbados Assembly opined that the savage brutishness of enslaved Africans rendered them wholly incapable of conversion to Christianity.

But it even goes further because what it means is that every church built in the country post 1660 and even before was not built by any planters or slave owners, it was built by African slaves and the money provided from the proceeds of the labour of African slaves. It was their labor for which they were not rewarded that produced the money to build these buildings. And so, when we talk about truth telling in sacred spaces within our context in the Caribbean, the truth is now being told, and the gospel is now being preached. It could not have been possibly done with any fervour prior to 1834, and perhaps not for a long time after. In fact, in the 1960s when Barbados became Independent, and drafted our constitution as an independent nation, the first line of the Preamble revealed the long-term consequences of the sin of omission. The first line of the Preamble reads:

“Whereas the love of free institutions and independence has strongly characterized the inhabitants of Barbados; and whereas the Governor and the said inhabitants settled a Parliament in the year 1639;”

What does this tell us? That even in 1966, there was this aberration that somehow Barbados was this great place, because the truth-telling that should have occurred, did not. So, in the constitution of a free people, we are now

hearing that has always been held by love of free institutions, when the Slave Code was actually implemented in Barbados.

Just as important for us, not only are we in the region charged with the responsibility to preach the gospel, but we are also charged with the responsibility to care for the sacred spaces because they were never really the property of the slave owners or planters. They never made a real contribution to their building or upkeep; the enslaved did.

If walls could talk, they would tell us that. However, we worship and minister under the aegis of the same Church of England which was a tool of oppression for over two hundred years.

And so, it is even more incumbent upon us who are called as leaders to lead this church now because we are the oppressed leading the institution that oppressed us. We must now overturn two hundred years of atrocities, two hundred years of the gospel deliberately, not being preached, we must overturn two hundred years of the sins of omission, so that we can influence and transform the life of our own people in our time. It is not the easiest thing, but the walls speak to us. The walls encourage us to tell the truth in these sacred spaces.

This does not connote an us versus them approach, an African versus European approach particularly when it comes to Barbados. I cannot let you leave with the impression that I am in some way presenting a Barbados that is divided because there is an oft suppressed truth that we are called to tell as well, especially about Barbados. When we speak of truth-telling in Barbados, like its religion, much of the social and racial stratification on which Barbados was built and perhaps still functions were also the consequence of sins of omission.

From as early as 1727, we know through the works of one of the same English priests that went there that he was flabbergasted to see the conditions in Barbados because the great segregation that he expected to exist, where whites were only mingling with whites and the slaves were infidels that he was going to convert. Instead, when he went there, he reported back to the Bishop of London,

As for those of our complexion who lay claim to our church, it will surprise your Lordship to hear how many of them use religion. They may well be averse to spiritual discipline, whose families are checkered with a colour which heaven seems to have appointed for a living monument of their uncleanness, who, debauch themselves with their infidel slaves, and inhumanly subject their unhappy offspring to bondage. Frequent debaucheries of all sorts, are lamentable instances of impiety notorious here. Sacred ordinances are very much slighted. (Arthur Holt, Dec. 21, 1727)

One hundred years after the settlement of Barbados, Arthur Holt reported that the country was checkered. It was not black or white anymore; it was mixed.

I have highlighted this to implore you in this region, you here in United Kingdom, that you also have similar issues, especially those who have come from the West Indies and other parts of the world, who now hold prominent positions within the church. You are managing an institution that oppressed your fore parents. An institution that engaged in the sin of omission. You must agitate for equity and equality. You must agitate for the transformation of the system. You must tell your truth in these sacred spaces when you mount the pulpits.

You must tell the truth that for two hundred years ministering in the new world, the Church of England never preached the gospel. Within the context of what I would have outlined before, you never preached the gospel because you were never commissioned to do so. They were commissioned to prop up a system and to maintain the system and therefore it has implications for our Racial Justice Unit because I am reading some very strange things where people are saying that the Church need not give anything and the one hundred million dollars that you have set aside should be used to help parishes here in the United Kingdom. I suspect there is some omission here as well because somewhere in Holy Scripture we have heard this kind of lament before. I believe it is in the Gospel according to St. John chapter 12 and verse five, by no less a character than Judas Iscariot; “This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.”

The Church of England had not preached the gospel in its fullness for two hundred years. Think of the privilege you have as the Church of England and what you have received at the hands of my ancestors, the hands of the ancestors of people who live in the West Indies and in the Americas.

Do they not deserve some of the toil of their ancestors? In Barbados, we have an aged population. We have one of the highest concentrations of centenarians in the region. Our people have worked hard. They have maintained good health. But we now have a pandemic of aging, and the Church really needs help to assist in caring for these people. We need to assist in caring for those whose ancestors would have been oppressed.

And so, I implore you, the Church of England. I have not come to you with cap in hand. I am just appealing to your conscience. I appeal to your conscience as a

church that engaged in the sin of omission for over two hundred years, that if we are going to engage in truth-telling, let us also reflect on the years in which we failed to tell the truth and uphold the Gospel.

I thank you.