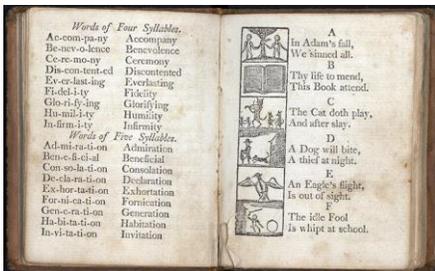


INTRODUCTION

This is the story of Blessed Absalom Jones, priest, abolitionist, and saint, who is listed in the Episcopal calendar of saints, February 13. Absalom Jones was born on November 7, 1746 and, in 1804, became the first African American to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church of the United States. When we learn the Rev. Absalom Jones' history, we do not just learn about one extraordinary man. We, also, learn about the Episcopal church, then and now.



A common primer in use during Absalom's life.

ENSLAVEMENT

Absalom Jones was born enslaved on Cedar Creek Hundred plantation in the state of Delaware on November 6, 1746.

What does it mean to be born enslaved? It means you are owned by another person. You have to do what this person says – work when they say, eat when they say, sleep when they say. You are not free. You are property.

Absalom's family was enslaved, too. They were all owned by a wealthy planter named Abraham Wynkoop. They were part of his property that would be handed down in his will to his sons and daughters. After Abraham's death, when Absalom was a teenager, the Wynkoop family sold Absalom's mother and siblings. Absalom was left behind, and never saw his mother again.

When he was still a little boy, Absalom was taken from the fields to work inside the Wynkoop house. This gave him the chance to earn a little money as tips. He saved this money and finally had enough to buy three books - a primer, a spelling book, and a Bible. (A primer was a book that taught reading and writing.) Learning to read and write had a big impact on Absalom's future. It also allowed him to write his mother letters.

Discussion

The enslavement of African Americans is a deeply shameful and sinful part of our history for white and black Americans. How do you think the history of African enslavement is still affecting America today? How is it affecting your neighborhood in Philadelphia? What things do you think need to change?

Many white Americans at the time did not think slavery was wrong, most of whom were Christians. How could this have been true? Whose suffering are we unable to see today in America? Do you think the attitudes of white Americans have changed since this time? If not, how could we as a church help change them?



NEW FREEDOM AND COMMUNITY

The Wynkoop family sold their plantation in Delaware and moved to Philadelphia, taking Absalom with them. They opened a store, and because Absalom had taught himself to read and write, he became the store's clerk. Absalom attended St. Peter's Church at Third and Pine Streets with the Wynkoops.

When Absalom Jones was 24 years old, in 1770, he married Mary King at Christ Church on Second Street in Philadelphia. Mary was enslaved, also, and their owners had to give permission for Absalom and Mary to marry. Absalom borrowed money and used his savings to buy Mary's freedom. If he had not, his children would have been the property of the Wynkoop family. In 1784, when he was 38 years old, Absalom was finally able to buy his own freedom. Absalom continued to work as a clerk in the Wynkoop's store but was now paid a salary.

Soon after becoming free, Absalom Jones became friends with a man named Richard Allen. They both saw a need in Philadelphia to take care of newly freed African Americans. Those who became sick, or widowed, or orphaned, often had nowhere to turn. Absalom Jones, Richard Allen with other African American men and women formed a self-help organization - the Free African Society. It was the first organization to help free African Americans.

While Absalom Jones and Richard Allen helped many African American Philadelphians who were in need, they also began to preach to the African American community at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Fourth and Race Streets, Philadelphia. Word soon spread and the congregation grew.

In the early 1790s, when Absalom Jones was in his early 40s, St. George's decided its African American members had to worship, separately, in the newly built church balcony. In response, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen led most of the African American members out of the church in an historic, peaceful, walk-out.

At first the displaced group met in people's homes and the Rev. Joseph Pilmore, a priest at St. Paul's Church, Third and Locust Streets (now the home of Episcopal Community Services), served as their minister. Absalom Jones, Richard Allen and other members of the Free African Society, then, started the African Church in Philadelphia. The influential physician, abolitionist and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush, helped them.

The church's congregation decided to join the Episcopal Church. Richard wanted to be a Methodist and left the African Church to form [Mother] Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The African Church's members asked Absalom Jones to be their leader. Absalom prayed [like Jacob at the Jabbok, Genesis 32:22-32] and felt that God wanted him to be their leader and would bless their work. Serving first as a Reader, Absalom Jones worked with Bishop William White and the African Church was admitted to the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania as the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Discussion

Absalom Jones gained his freedom in his late 30s and his life became his own. He began an organization to help others and began to preach. What do you think about his choices? What would you have done if you were him? How do you think his faith influenced his choices?

When Absalom Jones was enslaved and still a child, he was isolated on the plantation and had no family. When he became free, he became part of a wider community – first his own new family, then the Free African Society, then a new church. Community made him stronger – it empowered him – to change himself and his city. How do you feel you are part of a community? What is it about community that empowers us? Does your community give you what you need?



Recreation of Yellow Fever epidemic

RADICAL LOVE

While the Free African Society was raising money to build the African Church, a terrible outbreak of yellow fever struck Philadelphia in 1793. Thousands of people were sick and dying. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen worked with Philadelphia's mayor, Matthew Clarkson, and Benjamin Rush, as they led the African American community in tending to the sick and burying the dead. They worked tirelessly. Richard Allen and Joseph Pilmore both got sick but they both recovered. Matthew Carey published a book that praised Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, but that said bad things about many of the African American nurses. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen published their own book – the first book published by African Americans in the United States – that defended the African American nurses.

Discussion

African American Philadelphians risked their lives to take care of their white neighbors at a time when most white Philadelphians were deeply prejudiced against them. Here we can see what it is like to live out Jesus' commandment to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. What do you think happens when we try to love our enemies? Why does Jesus think it is so important for us to do it?



The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas today

ORDINATION AND THE CHURCH

Absalom Jones was ordained a deacon in The Episcopal Church in 1795.

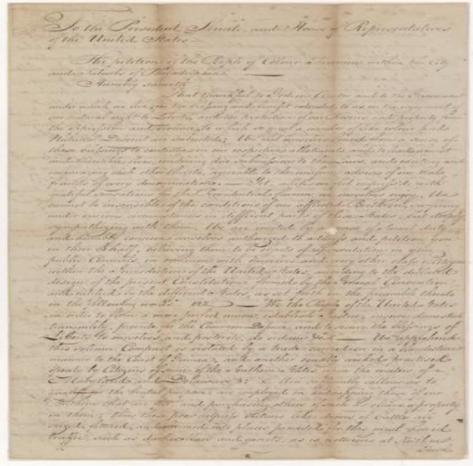
In 1804, when the Rev. Absalom Jones was 56 years old he became the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church. He was ordained by Bishop William White, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania. The Diocese of Pennsylvania negotiated a compromise with Bishop White to ordain the Rev. Jones: neither the Rev. Jones nor anyone from St. Thomas was allowed to attend the annual diocesan convention.

[As a point of history, a man born in the African country of Ghana, Philip Quaque, who was ordained in London in 1765, was the first African priest in the Church of England and in the Anglican Communion.]

In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, St. Thomas was finally admitted to convention in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. In 1878, 76 years after the Rev. Absalom Jones was ordained, the first seminary was started to train black men for the priesthood. It was a segregated institution named the Bishop Payne Divinity School. In 1884, the first African Americans served as delegates to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church with voting rights. In 1918, 116 years after the Rev. Absalom Jones was ordained, the first black priests were consecrated “suffragan bishops for colored work” in the Episcopal church.

Discussion

The history of the Episcopal Church, like wider U.S. history, is one filled with racism, classism, and sexism. What is the Episcopal Church like in Philadelphia today? Have we made progress since the time of the Rev. Absalom Jones? What changes do you think Jesus would most like to see in our church?



Absalom Jones' petition to Congress

THE FINAL YEARS

Over the years, the Rev. Absalom Jones continued to preach at St. Thomas. He was loved by the congregation for being such a caring pastor. He was very well respected and spoke out in opposition to slavery. Before he was ordained, he worked with Quakers, Christ Church abolitionist Congressman John Swanwick, and others, and the petitioned the US Congress in 1797 and 1799 to end slavery.

The Rev. Absalom Jones started a day school for African American children at St. Thomas in 1804.

The U.S. Congress passed a law in 1808 that tried to stop the transatlantic slave trade. In thanksgiving and celebration, the Rev. Jones preached an important sermon known as “The Thanksgiving Sermon.” He told the people that God was against slavery.

In the War of 1812 the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen with their friend James Forten, a Revolutionary War veteran, sailmaker and member of St. Thomas, led the African American community in helping defend the City of Philadelphia against an invasion by the British.

When he died on February 13, 1818 the Rev. Absalom Jones was known throughout Philadelphia for his devotion to and care of his congregation, his community, and his city.

We remember the Rev. Absalom Jones because he loved God so deeply. We remember him because he blazed new paths for freedom of body and spirit, and took action as an Episcopal priest against injustice, using extraordinary courage. We remember him because of his tireless devotion and care for others. We remember him because he led our Church forward into its true ministry to welcome all people and to serve justice and freedom.

Discussion

What did you learn from this story?

What part of this story was most meaningful to you?