

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

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The Feast of Absalom Jones

The phrase, “All are Welcome” appears frequently on signs and posters in Episcopal churches, and indeed, is used by many churches to show hospitality and invitation. It’s a great intention, but for those of us who didn’t grow up in The Episcopal Church, are new to a particular parish, or are different from the main demographic of a congregation, All are Welcome can have an addendum, a qualifier. All are welcome, as long as you learn our liturgy, as long as you can juggle the red book and blue book and know that the S music is in the front of the hymnal, and figure out when to sit and stand. All are welcome, if you like the music we like and do things the way we do and look like we look, or if you don’t, just be quiet and don’t make yourself too conspicuous.

We don’t mean it to feel that harsh. We are genuinely trying to be welcoming. We just like things our way, we are comfortable with each other, we are consoled by our traditions and we don’t want anything to change because of new people coming in.

It was not much different in Paul’s time. Paul was living among and ministering with the Galatians, people who the Romans called “barbarians.” As the Galatians heard and received the Good News of Christ, Peter and others in the Jesus movement felt that naturally, to join this Jewish movement, the new followers needed to be circumcised. To become Jewish, like them.

Paul says no. Paul has seen a vision, he has received a call from Jesus, to do something totally new. Paul is called to bring the message of the one God, the one God in Christ, to everyone, to create a multicultural community of faith, Jews and Gentiles together.

If you let yourself be circumcised, Paul says, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Galatians, you do not have to give up your identity, you do not have to become just like us, to be part of us. Instead, Paul says, we Jews need to expand our view of this community. We need to imagine a world where there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female.

Paul is saying, if we make you fit in to be like us, we will have made you smaller, and we will have made ourselves smaller too.

He is saying, my identity as a Jew is strong enough that I can be who I am and let you be who you are and we can all belong here.

Today, we join other churches in this Diocese in celebrating Absalom Jones, the first Black priest in The Episcopal Church, an American saint, a Philadelphia saint.

Absalom Jones and his fellow minister Richard Allen were both welcomed into St George's Methodist Episcopal Church, at least at first. They were both dynamic lay preachers who could inspire and draw in new members, and this must have been both exciting and challenging to the longer-term congregation. At a certain point it maybe felt like there were just too many Black people, that their church was slipping away from them, changing to something different and frightening.

So the leadership decided. Black people of course were welcome at St George's, but they should not be so visible. They should worship upstairs in the balcony, separate from white members.

One Sunday morning, the ushers enforced this new rule, they pulled Absalom Jones and Richard Allen from their knees during the prayers and told them to go upstairs. Jones pleaded, I'll go, just wait until the prayers are over. No, he was told, you must go now.

Jones and Allen instead got up and walked out of St George's. All the other Black worshipers followed. They never went back.

Absalom Jones refused to hide himself, he refused to be invisible, smaller, in order to belong in the Church.

The white members of St George's, what did they see that day? Did they notice the scuffle, the whispers happening in the pews where Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were trying to pray? Maybe they didn't notice anything until they saw the procession heading out the door. Maybe they thought, Why are they causing such a scene? Maybe they thought, church is no place for a political statement, what are they doing? Maybe they saw the whole thing play out and thought, Don't they understand that this is how it has to be, that it's only right and proper?

Absalom Jones left the Methodists that day and went on to found the first Black parish within The Episcopal Church. He didn't have it so easy with the Episcopalians either, but that's a longer story. Richard Allen couldn't make it work with the Methodists either and founded a new denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Both of them lost something when they had to leave their faith community. But the white congregation at St George's lost something more. They lost the opportunity to see a greater vision for their church, a greater vision for the community of Jesus followers, a fuller glimpse of the Body of Christ.

For those of us who are white, keeping things familiar and comfortable, keeping ourselves separate, has kept us smaller. It has kept us ignorant of the suffering our Black and Brown siblings endure. We are totally oblivious of the police violence that Black and Brown people have experienced for generations. We don't even hear about the deaths of Keith Porter Jr, Parady La, Luis Gustavo Núñez Cáceres and others who died in detention or were shot by officers, we don't even hear about them until Renee and Alex, people we can better relate to, are victims of the same violence. We are oblivious to the harm, we are cut off from it. And also, we are cut off from the joy.

We got a beautiful glimpse of that joy last Sunday, when Bad Bunny performed for the Superbowl half-time show. Rapping and singing in Spanish and showing the fullness of the culture and people of Puerto Rico, Bad Bunny invited us to see, to be a part of, the joy that happens when we open ourselves to a greater vision of what we can be. Bad Bunny invited us to see how a new world opens up for us when we let ourselves just a little out of our comfort zone. He invited us to experience how much bigger America is than what some of us have made it, and by extension, how much bigger and loving our world could be.

St Martin's, let us take this invitation from Paul, and Absalom, and Bad Bunny, to get out of our comfortable place, to move beyond our fear. Now that our hearts have been broken by Renee and Alex, now that we have seen the joy revealed by Bad Bunny, let us be opened even more to the fullness of who we are and who we can be.

St Martin's, let us move closer to a place of truly seeing Christ, who came to us as a poor brown Jew from a town under Roman occupation, Christ who now is all colors and all genders and all locations. When we can get a better glimpse of this Christ, by seeing our neighbors, we will move from a place of worshiping him from a distance to a place where we know Christ as Jesus asked us to know him. As a friend. Amen.