



The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche
Bishop of New York

Service of Apology for Slavery in the Diocese of New York
March 25, 2023
The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine

THE SERMON

Grace to you, and Peace; from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am honored to look out upon you who have come out to this great cathedral today to participate in this diocesan service of Apology for the participation of this diocese in the trafficking of African people and our complicity in both the slave trade and the enslavement of men and women in New York and in our churches. The announcement of this service has generated a fair amount of interest, with many people thanking us for doing this and honoring the emotional cost that what we do today will require of us and the people in this diocese. But others, members of our churches and beyond, have raised questions about what it means for us to make a corporate and public apology, when we will all come to this day from our own histories and lives and backgrounds. Some have pointed out that their own ancestors fought in the Union Army, never held slaves, always opposed the institution of slavery, and are asking why their church would now require that they apologize for practices which they and their families had no part in.

Understand that we have not come to this cathedral today so that we can all make individual apologies for the part played by our own ancestors during slave days in the Diocese of New York. Nor are we here to require that of others. We have no right to do so. Rather, this is an institutional apology. The apology being offered here today is offered by the Diocese of New York as an entity, making apology for the things that we did corporately to further the suffering of others under slavery, and for the ways in which the wealth generated by the ownership of slaves and the slave trade helped to build the magnificent edifices which are our churches, and created the foundation for the endowments which supported our churches throughout this long history and still do.

In the eighteenth century, New Yorkers held more people in bondage than any other place in America except Charleston, South Carolina, and the slave trade continued through New York Harbor long after slavery had been banned in this state, up to the very eve of the Civil War, when in 1860 the London Times declared that New York Harbor was the largest slave market in the world. It is undeniable that culturally and economically, slavery was woven into the fabric of New York for centuries, and through our vast shipping industry was the source of much of the wealth that built this city into the empire that it became. At the same time it is true that from early in our history there was an abolitionist fervor building in the north, so that New York ordered in 1808 the phasing out of slavery and an end to the institution. It is also true that countless New Yorkers fought and many lost their lives in the Civil War to preserve the Union and to end the slave trade and enslavement in America. The people of the Diocese of New York lived through those years and each made their own choices. But the Diocese itself, as an institution, as an entity, also lived through those years, and we as the Diocese have a shared history which calls us to reflection and accountability.

People are complicated and so is our history, but we have in recent years in this diocese looked deeply into that history. We have studied the John Jay Amendment, which came to the convention of this diocese as late as 1860, asking that the clergy of our parishes preach on the evils of slavery once a year. And even that modest resolution was so threatening to the many delegates whose wealth was dependent on slavery that they abandoned the convention in order



to deny Mr. Jay's Amendment even the quorum it would need to be considered. We know that even following the Union victory, the rector of our Ossining parish hung out the Confederate battle flag as Abraham Lincoln's funeral train passed before his church, an act that split and divided that parish for the next century and a half. Individual people made decisions and choices through those years, and many of those decisions bring honor now to their memories, but many do not. It is neither to herald nor judge the lives and choices of the individual people who lived through those years which has brought us here today, but for us to give an account of the role and place that slavery had in the birth and building and growth of the whole of the Diocese of New York, and of the long-lasting importance which slavery-created wealth had in building the strength of the institution.

Five years ago at our convention we asked the churches of this diocese to take a deep dive into their own histories, to read their own documents and records, and we offered the help and support of our diocesan archives and our archivists to do that work. We asked churches to uncover and relearn the history of their parishes as those histories touched the institution of slavery and the enslavement of human beings. A number of our churches did just that. We told the story at convention of Saint James Madison Avenue making that plunge into their history and discovering that the wealth created on the backs of enslaved laborers built their church. And today they have a plaque erected on the Madison Avenue side of their church confessing that history, and praying, "Christ have Mercy." But Saint James was by no means alone. In the research done by parishes we discovered the huge part that slave trade money played in this diocese and our churches. It became clear to us that our collective history is profoundly complicated, but that we could not have become the great diocese that we did without the resources gained by Episcopalians through their investment in slavery, which in turn built and supported the life and mission of this diocese and church.

This service has been a long time coming, and is part of a larger movement of the Spirit in this diocese as we have made deep exploration into our history, and as we stand now prepared to begin investing in the payment of reparations. Because of that, and in recognition of the hour in which we now find ourselves, and in anticipation of the future that lies now before us, we have come to believe that this is the time when we as a diocese must make our apology for our participation in the unmistakable evil that was slavery. The hour is coming, Jesus said, and now is.

The Reparations Commission of this diocese was established fifteen or sixteen years ago to begin to make the deep dive into our past, and to examine how that past has shaped our present. And over that time the Reparations Commission has become a wellspring of educational offerings and learnings regarding slavery in New York, and particularly the role of slavery in the building up of this diocese. Five years ago the Reparations Commission embarked on a new and more ambitious undertaking. In 2018 we observed in this diocese what was called the Year of Lamentation. That was to be followed by a Year of Apology and a Year of Reparation. This has been our work over the five years hence. It did not happen in three neat small chapters, but has been a moving tide carrying this church forward as we engage the deep questions of our past, the wrongs done, and the ways in which that history continues to touch the life of the Diocese of New York and the lives of our African American brothers and sisters. In 2019 I asked the convention to invest 1.1 million dollars of our endowment as seed money for a reparations fund by which we could begin to make tangible investment in the lives and communities of descendants of African slaves. In the few years since the Reparations Commission has been building the organizational infrastructure to begin that work, and at our last convention we approved new corporate structures through which we may begin to pay Reparations for the trafficking in and enslavement of African people.

Now as we stand at the threshold of that work, the Reparations Commission, recognizing that our work of reparation will avail us nothing if it does not include an owning-up, an acknowledgement of responsibility, an admission of harm done, has asked for a liturgy around our common altar in this cathedral, where that owning-up can happen. A service of corporate Apology for the complicated past of this diocese. That has brought us here today, and it is my honor as your bishop to offer, as I will a bit later, the words of apology on behalf of this great diocese which I am privileged to lead and serve. May God accept our words, and the broken and contrite hearts by which we offer them, cast his grace and favor over us, and bestow upon us the rich grace and gift of his forgiveness,



A few days ago I was interviewed over the phone for a radio program regarding today's service, and at the end of the interview the reporter asked me if there was a particular piece of this reparations work which had moved me most deeply and spoken to me most powerfully. I did not expect that question. So I thought about all we have done over these years, and how much we have learned, and about the suffering we unearthed. It was all moving and it was all powerful. But when I answered the reporter it was to remember an event that happened to me over twenty years ago. I was new to this diocese at that time, and I had been called to serve as the pastor to the clergy of the diocese and their families. So one day I went down to Saint Augustine's Church on the Lower East Side to visit Errol Harvey. He was the rector of the parish at that time, and Edgar Hopper of blessed memory was the deacon. It was a weekday morning, and quiet in the church. The three of us made our way into the worship space itself. It was still and serene and beautiful, and the softest light you can imagine was streaming in through the windows. We stood in the well of the church, before the altar, and I looked up at the grand wrap-around balcony, and Father Harvey asked me, "Do you see the windows in the wall behind the balcony?" And I did. And he said, "Those are the slave galleries. We are the only church in the diocese to still have its slave galleries intact." And I looked up at those windows, and said, "Yes, I see. I understand." And he said, "Not you don't. You have to go there."

So the three of us made our way up to the slave galleries. To go to the balcony there is an inviting and spacious staircase. But to go to the slave galleries there is a very narrow, turning, steep and precarious set of stairs. Deacon Hopper explained that the staircase was deliberately made difficult to maneuver so that anyone going up or down would have to go slowly, in single file, and that meant that all of the slaves in the gallery could be controlled by one guard standing at the foot of the stairs. There are no pews in the slave galleries. Instead, there are low risers, just steps, so I sat down on them. And that pushed my knees up under my chin, and I looked out into the church through the window in the wall. I don't know if it is possible for any person in the twenty-first century to cross over and truly enter into the life and being and mind of a nineteenth century slave, but I am certain it is all but impossible for a privileged white man. The distance is too great. But for a moment I was given a glimpse - I could feel it - a glimpse into the constant, daily humiliations visited upon enslaved people, and into the constant, daily reminders of their exclusion. Never to forget that they are the Other.

When I came back down the stairs it was with eyes dimmed by tears and a throat choked with emotion. Unable to speak. Moved not only by what was done to these enslaved people all those many years before, but by the recognition that humiliation and exclusion continue to our own day to be too much of the story of African American people in this country and, if we are honest, in our church. If you have it within you to love another human being, or if you have the capacity to observe, truly observe, the lives and spirits of others with godly Christian empathy, this stuff will break your heart. You cannot come away unscathed or unchanged. I've been back to the slave galleries since then, but that first visit was the metanoia. And when the reporter asked me what moved me, what held power for me, it was that day and that place that rushed back upon me. And I am confident that we owe something to the men and women and children who climbed those narrow stairs and sat in that room of humiliation and exclusion, and heard the Gospel proclamation of a God who loves everyone equally through his Son Jesus Christ, and heard that message while still trapped in their bondage. And we owe something to their great-grandchildren too. African American men and women who, despite everything, continue to worship in the Episcopal Church, and to hear the perfect clarion liberating word of Christ in a church that all too often fails to live up to our high calling.

One of the gifts of the Year of Lamentation was to crack open the shell around all that history and those experiences and those lives and let us find ways to cross over the many divisions which separate us one from another, that we may live an authentically shared life, to carry the terrible history together as a common people of God. We are people of empathy and compassion. We really are. We are Christians, and through our own dear Jesus it may be that we can discover our common humanity and by healing the past take the steps to begin to heal our own day and maybe, by the grace and miracle of God, bind up this broken world.

Because the legacy of slavery casts a long shadow, and that shadow continues to fall upon the United States of America and upon the Episcopal Church. So that we must be aware, acutely aware, that the apology we make today is not



simply for things done a century and a half ago, but that we are also sorry for the legacy of slavery that is not fully erased from our midst. For all that is not yet healed, and for the unconscious and conscious biases that continue to shape our common life. So we are also sorry for the long shadow.

I have been in communication with one of our priests who has the story to tell of a young African American man who was abused by a priest of this diocese quite some years ago, but whose story was not heard and whose injustice was never addressed, and it seems clear that those failures derived from an inherent racism in our system. I confess that I have been part of the failure of that accountability, but no more. We will address what happened to that young man. I will. Apology begs forgiveness, and forgiveness calls for amendment of life. May God give this diocese and its bishop the grace for amendment, the capacity for renewal. But we will shine a light on what happened to that young man, because the inability of people in the majority culture to look upon black men and women in the fullness of their humanity and to know their joys and their pain has its roots in the dehumanization of African people that was bound up in the lives of New Yorkers for so long. This is the long shadow. “The past is not dead,” William Faulkner said. “In fact, it’s not even past.”

We have struggled for years with the challenges before priests of African descent in applying for positions of leadership in the larger, highly resourced churches of our diocese; churches which are largely historically white. Highly accomplished and able black clergy are appreciated and honored across our diocese, but are less commonly seen by white people as candidates to be their own leaders. But it is from those high profile parishes that cathedral and seminary deans are commonly drawn, and bishops. The barriers to advanced placement for black clergy are part of the long shadow which slavery continues to cast upon our lives even now. You need to know that this is heartbreaking for highly qualified and able priests who find their careers in the church and their ministries before God held back and stymied by the color of their skin.

The economic divisions within the Episcopal Diocese of New York perfectly reflect the economic divisions in this great city and the diocese in which we live and move. I have watched our great churches buy multi-million dollar organs and restore priceless stained glass windows and hire teams of white priests, while our smaller and poorer and blacker churches wage the constant battle to keep their doors open and try to find a retired person who can come in on Sunday morning to celebrate the eucharist. This, too, is the long shadow. A culture which consigns perpetual dependency of poor churches on wealthy churches and robs Christians of their dignity. This pattern exists across our church, but nowhere more so than in the Bronx. The Harlem River is chilly and cold; it chills the body but not the soul.

It will not be so in the Kingdom of Heaven. The long shadow of the legacy of enslavement will not fall on the Beloved Community. It will not dim the light of the Kingdom of God. What we begin with this apology must continue - it will continue - and strengthen and grow until amendment of life and reparation reparation touches every corner of our common life in this diocese. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Amen.

THE APOLOGY

Gracious God, Giver of Life, your son Jesus Christ declared to his disciples that he came so that all may be one, as he is one with you. It is for that unity of spirit and life that we pray, for the fulfillment of our common humanity, and for the sweet grace of Beloved Community. In the midst of divisions in the church born of racist exclusion, and in recognition that our history of slave trafficking and enslavement brought so much harm to your children even as the church made profit to support the planting of altars and the erection of great temples, we gather before you now to accept responsibility, to make apology, and to say before you and one another that we are sorry for the things we have said and the things we have done. We are sorry for the inestimable suffering of the men, women and children who endured the cruelty and privation of enslavement in the homes and businesses and churches of the Diocese of New York. We are sorry for our participation as a community and institution in the humiliation and exclusion of other people, even in our houses of prayer. We are sorry for our reliance on resources gained through the slave trade to



build and sustain the temples in which we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and declare your blessing upon your people. We are sorry for living on endowed money reaped from the trafficking in human beings. We are sorry for our failure to see you in others, to deny the humanity of others, and we are sorry that our church has profited by the dehumanization of people of African descent. And, dear Lord, we are sorry for the long shadow of indifference, racial bias and discrimination which continues to fall upon this church all too often, for our failure to love others as we have been loved, and for our failure to respect the dignity of every human being. Accept, we pray, the apology we make today. May the things we say and do on this day please you, and by your grace grant us the gift of your forgiveness and the courage to make amendment of life and repair of harm done. Through Jesus Christ Our Great High Priest, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, now and forever. Amen.

THE ABSOLUTION

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desires not the death of sinners, but rather than they may turn from their wickedness and live, has given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins. He pardons and absolves all those who truly repent, and with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel.

Therefore we beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do on this day, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, to that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.