

legacies of **SLAVERY**

Black History Month **Service of Worship** *Freedom: Order of Service*

1. Opening Words & Prayer
2. Hymn: I will sing, I will sing a song unto the Lord - *Rejoice & Sing (R&S) 279 (v1-4)*
3. Prayer incl Lord's Prayer
4. Hymn: When Israel was in Egypt's Land - *R&S 643*
5. Introduction to theme
6. Scripture: Acts 12: 1-11
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8. Hymn: And can it be - *R&S 366*
9. Scripture: John 11: 1-6, 17-44
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Black History Month

Service of Worship

Freedom

1. Opening Words and Prayer

Jesus said...

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Great and wonderful God we greet you.
We come humbly, acknowledging your greatness;
we come boldly, certain of your love.

As we gather today
we ask that your Holy Spirit would flow
in us and between us.
Let us hear your voice;
let us feel your presence;
let us experience your touch.

Feed us, refresh us,
and fill us with passion for you,
your word and your world.
Amen

2. Hymn: *Rejoice & Sing* (R&S) 279: I will sing, I will sing a song unto the Lord - (v1-4)

3. Prayer incl Lord's Prayer

Lover of our souls
we bring our prayers to you.

Thank you for seeing us,
for hearing us,
for receiving us exactly as we are.

We offer you our triumphs;
we bring you our failings.
We ask you to forgive our wrongdoings
and set us free.

Heal us,
transform us
and remake us according to your holy will.

In the name of Jesus
who taught us to pray together...

The Lord's Prayer

4. Hymn: R&S 643: When Israel was in Egypt's land

5. Intro to theme - Freedom

Our theme today is freedom... and let us start with a question...

What does it mean to be free?

(Conversation with congregation)

Are you free? In what ways are you free? In what ways are you not free?

Does God want us to have freedom? How do you know? And what does that freedom look like?

6. Scripture Reading: Acts 12: 1-11

7. Reflection

There is Peter, in prison, under heavy guard. He is waiting to be led out to face almost certain death...

Suddenly there are lights and angels; chains which unfasten themselves; gates which open themselves; guards who miraculously cannot see Peter literally walking to freedom.

It is very apparent from this wonder-filled text that God definitely wanted to set Peter free... but consider this question: Why was Peter in prison in the first place?

In the opening verses of the text, we hear that Herod had James put to death... an action which was apparently pleasing to the Judeans. Herod decides to give the people more of what they want - and he has Peter thrown into prison too, with the intention that Peter should suffer the same fate as James.

But God's will prevails, and Peter escapes from prison. When Peter realises he is really free, he declares that God's angel has rescued him from the hands of Herod and from whatever the Judean people had been wanting or expecting.

God wanted Peter's freedom. The Judean people wanted and expected something quite different. It was apparently their desire and expectation that Peter should be imprisoned and that he should die. God's will. Human will. Not necessarily the same thing!

8. **Hymn:** R&S 366: And can it be
9. **Scripture Reading:** John 11: 1-6, 17-44

10. Reflection

This reflection was written by Karen Campbell from her experiences. Feel free to adapt

I was born in Britain - according to the well-known anthem:

*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?
Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.*

Note the sentiments of the song - and the repetition of the last line: '**God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.**'

Growing up as a Black youngster in this country, I always knew that racism was real. I knew there were people who hated me even without knowing me; people who hated me because of the colour of my skin. People who wanted to 'send me home' even though this country is where I was born, the only country in which I have ever lived.

I wasn't particularly angry about the situation; it was simply a fact of life.

I grew up knowing and believing that as a Black person I had to be at least twice as good in order to be equal. I looked around and saw the underachievement of many Black youngsters - particularly the boys - and I determined that was not going to be me. I wasn't angry. I didn't particularly question the situation. I just got on with it. It was simply a fact of life.

My parents are Jamaican. I am proud of my Jamaican heritage. But I remember inheriting an understanding that Caribbeans don't like Africans and Africans don't like Caribbeans.

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I had no idea why this should be; I didn't think to question it. I simply absorbed it and carried on. It was just a fact of life.

Racism. Discrimination. Inequalities in education, in employment, in income, in housing, in achievement.

No sense of 'belonging'. Strange resentments whose origins I didn't know. This was my reality - from childhood into adolescence, into adulthood.

I didn't think to ask the question, but I ask it now... Was I free? Am I free?

In January 2018 I visited Ghana as participant of a programme organised by the Council for World Mission (CWM), seeking to explore the Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery.

They say history is always told from the perspective of the victor... Growing up, I never really heard much about slavery at all. It was somewhere 'out there', buried in the stories of the great British Empire, savage lands being settled by civilised Britain:

At school, I didn't like history. I didn't give the issue of the slave trade a second thought - it was like a distant story in an unread book. The people involved were nameless, faceless 'characters'... it was in the past. It was what it was!

Going to Ghana, this so called 'story' comes to graphic and disturbing reality.

I have discovered that the transatlantic slave trade saw the enslavement and forcible removal of millions of African people - estimates range between 12-100 million Africans torn from their lands. Families torn apart, communities decimated.

Visiting Elmina Castle on the Atlantic coast, we stood where African men, women and children were stored in horrendous, inhumane conditions, crammed together in dungeons - no sanitation, no washing facilities, in readiness to be shipped. Many died of disease and malnutrition, and there was no telling how long before their bodies would be removed. But that was ok... the barbaric treatment was viewed as a form of 'natural selection' - those who died were too weak for the labour to which they were being sent; those who survived showed they were strong enough to work, but would hopefully be weakened enough in the process not to offer too much resistance!

We stood in the quarters where men together with boys, and women together with girls, were stored. We stood on the balcony from where the governor would look down into a small courtyard where the women would be assembled so he could choose which woman should be cleaned and brought to him for his pleasure. Resistance meant public punishment, a cannonball being chained to her ankle in the courtyard, in the sun, as punishment for her and a warning for the other women. We felt the oppressiveness of a virtually airless cell, almost completely dark, where male resistors were left with no food until they simply starved to death.

After being stored for weeks and months, men and women were forced into the room of no return - high up in the castle, with a narrow opening looking out into the Atlantic, through which they were forced and loaded into the waiting slave ships, never to return. Transported as cargo, head to toe, head to toe, to make maximum use of the space.

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Some apparently leapt to their deaths rather than go into the ships. Others were thrown into the sea.

En route, the bodies of those who died were dumped in the sea; those who resisted were thrown overboard. If bad weather threatened the ship, 'the cargo' would be dumped, and compensation claimed for loss of property. Millions of African people, living their lives, found themselves the property of others. Where was their freedom?

The transatlantic slave trade was truly horrific - in its scale, in its cruelty, in every way... but absolutely abhorrent to me is the fact that this trade was, to a large extent, enacted by people with Bible in hand and God on their lips! So called Christians! How did they not see God's persistent call throughout the Bible for justice - 'What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?'

How did they make sense of the Old and New Testament insistence that the most important commandments are to love the Lord, your God AND love your neighbour as yourself? Did they not see the text which says that anyone who claims to love God, whom they have not seen, but hates a brother or sister, whom they have seen, is a liar? Or the caution that the love of money is a root for all kinds of evil - and the slave trade was ALL about money! How did they reconcile their supposed faith with their abhorrent actions?

Above the female dungeon at Elmina, near the quarters where the governor selected and raped African women at will, there is a chapel where the enslavers gathered to worship God. Could they not hear the women's cries from below? Could they not hear the cries from God's own lips?

Inscribed above a large window in the chapel are words from Psalm 132 - the Lord makes his home in Zion. The enslavers claimed to have God with them as they abused this people and this land. According to them, God had made his home right there, in that place - with them! How could they fail to see that the God who wanted freedom for Peter as he languished in a prison cell equally wanted freedom for the estimated 1,000 Africans held in the castle at any one time, the millions who became property - treated as less than human - the uncounted others who perished?

This was my 3rd trip to Ghana, each time tracing the history of the transatlantic slave trade... but this time, going beyond the history to identify and name the legacies which continue today. I have increasingly grown to realise that all of what I experienced as a Black youngster, born and raised in Britain - 'land of hope and glory', can be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade:

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An ingrained idea that whiteness is superior to Blackness - manifested in racism and discrimination. Messages of inferiority internalised by Black people, leading to low aspirations and contributing to underachievement. The lack of belonging. The animosity between Africans - (those who remained in Africa) and Caribbeans (the descendants of the enslaved Africans who were taken away). I have increasingly come to see how much of the wealth and power and privilege enjoyed by Britain (and other rich nations) - so much of what makes this place supposedly 'Great' - has been amassed at the expense of my ancestors, and is maintained by the exploitation of different peoples around the world.

In Africa the legacies are experienced even more starkly - the underdevelopment of the continent due to the removal of vast numbers of her fittest, most able young men and women; the continuing poverty blighting many communities... and continued exploitation by those of European descent. The ongoing drain of her young people, leaving in search of 'a better life' in America or Europe - often to find themselves earning slave-wages, unwanted, resented.

The perpetual images of poverty and/or corruption which inform the world of Africa and makes us look at that continent and her people with pity or scorn. I am only skimming the surface... but so many ways in which Black people, and people of colour, continue to have their lives limited and constrained.

*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?
Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.*

God surely desires freedom for all people... not freedom to do anything we want, not freedom without responsibility, but surely the freedom to simply live.

So, I turn to the text from the Gospel of John - the death of Lazarus. Jesus is busy, doing what Jesus does, when he gets news of his friend's illness - and he doesn't go to him straightaway. By the time Jesus does arrive, Lazarus has been dead and buried 4 days. His sisters are weeping; the crowds are weeping. Seeing all of this, hearing Martha and Mary's declarations 'Had you been here, our brother would not have died!' Jesus is overcome with emotion... and Jesus weeps. But Jesus does more than just join the lament - as we know, he acts. Jesus performs a miracle. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb... and Lazarus comes out!

I want to particularly highlight two parts of the story:

First, when Jesus approaches the tomb, he asks that the stone sealing the cave be removed... and Martha says - 'Lord, it's already been four days! There is going to be a stench!' There is a very understandable reluctance to follow this instruction. 'Why would we open the tomb? We know what lies within, and it's nothing good! Sad as it may be, it's best to keep things as they are! But unless Mary, Martha and the others take a chance on removing the stone - despite their fears - how would Lazarus receive the opportunity of life?

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Second, are the words at the end of the account. When Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, Lazarus emerges still wrapped in the grave cloths... and Jesus says, 'Untie him, and let him go!' It's not enough that Lazarus has breath and blood coursing through his system... in order to have life, in order to live and not just exist, he needs to be unbound, untied, unshackled - set free!

So, let's go back to the continuing legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. The slave trade was a particularly grotesque chapter in history. Confronting this history is truly disturbing and painful - as one participant in Ghana expressed, 'You may not see the wounds bleeding, but they have not healed'. Many people, both Black and white, would prefer to leave it in the past. Let it go. It hurts too much. Don't open it up, because what is uncovered truly stinks!

I get that thinking. A few years ago, that was me! But the truth is, unless we open the tomb, risk the stench, how is new life to emerge from death? Sadly, tragically, the stench of the slave trade is not just in the past. Today lives are limited. Today lives are blighted - in Africa, the Caribbean, Britain, America and all around the world. People who do have breath and blood, but who do not have the freedom to truly live.

Surely this is what the conviction that 'Black Lives Matter' is all about.

It is an abomination to see Black lives lightly snuffed out - as in the case of George Floyd and countless others who fall victim to the racist structures within which we live - and let's be clear, it is much more about the 'the way things are' than about any individual being overtly racist!

It is a disgrace to realise the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic -and, in fact, the global health inequalities which have long existed, but to which we have become desensitised.

We may claim that slavery has ended, but the shackles are still in place, preventing people from reaching their potential, becoming whomever or whatever they would wish to be. Too often in Christianity we point to the eternal life which lies beyond death - as Martha did, in our text today. But when Lazarus died, Jesus restored him to full life in *this* world, in *this* time.

Similarly, we need to open up the tomb, identify the grave cloths and remove them - untie God's people and set them free! The slave trade may have been abolished, but how can Africa be unbound from her grave cloths? How can African descent, Asian and indigenous peoples around the world be truly set free?

Freedom should not be a privilege enjoyed by the few, but a right for all. But let's think for a moment about the many issues, many grounds, many excuses which limit lives and keep people shackled today... Think about the structures and attitudes which limit the lives and expectations of Black peoples; those on the receiving end of racism and extremism; the Roma community - who continuously find themselves bottom of the pile; the plight of refugees - wanted nowhere; belonging nowhere.

Think about the economic injustice which forces people to work all hours in order to remain in grinding poverty; the so-called glass ceilings, which mean women are often disadvantaged and

prevented from moving upwards in society, in the workplace - even in the Church; the persecution of people because of their sexuality.

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Think about the effects on an individual, or a whole people, if they are continually told 'this is all you can be; this is all you can achieve.' So many groups... so many people... so many lives constrained to a greater or lesser extent, while the world carries on... often oblivious to the chains which shackle and inhibit the people around us. God desires His people's freedom. Jesus says 'untie them and let them go!' We must risk opening the tombs to enable new life... to set them free and let them live!

In Ghana, my friend and I unexpectedly found ourselves responsible for a closing act of worship. The CWM group gathered on a small beach, with our feet in the waters of the Atlantic - waters which hold untold secrets; waters which conceal unknown numbers of African bones; waters which took away millions of enslaved people.

Standing on that beach, we tore strips from a piece of African cloth - representing African people - individuals, families and communities. We felt the resistance of the cloth - this was no easy departure. It was a violent tearing apart, and it was met with great resistance. The strips were dipped in the waters, in memory of those who had gone before. Then we used the strips to voluntarily shackle ourselves to each other - those who history has separated recognising and volunteering that we are tied; that we must move forward together.

So, what about us, today? In a world full of prejudice and fear, do we risk rolling the stones away to enable new life? Are we involved in the business of untying bonds and setting people free, or are we too comfortable with our place in the status quo?

Who are the people and the causes with whom we are willing to stand, and to whom we are willing to be tied? Are we mindful of those being oppressed over there, or over there... and are we equally mindful of people who we ourselves help to keep down or keep out?

I believe God desires freedom for all God's people, but God's people are incredibly good at imprisoning each other - with our theology, our politics, our economics, our media, our cultural norms, our personal attitudes; our willingness to let others do our thinking and speaking for us. Our passiveness. Our indifference.

What are we willing to do to redress the balance? As the Church, as people of faith, and simply as fellow human beings, how can we help set God's people free?

11. Prayers

Let us use this time for self-reflection.
Let's place before God the people we are...
the limits which may have been placed on our lives,
the barriers we have faced,
the situations we may have struggled to overcome.

Let's place before God the people we may have scorned,
judged and misjudged;
the lives we may have helped to limit, through our action or
inaction.

Let's lift to God those people who we know are struggling -
due to bereavement or sickness;
physical, mental and economic stresses triggered by the lockdown,
or by continuing situations of injustice.

Let's pray against the current shift in world politics
which seems to be about appeasing intolerance
and is surely fuelling discrimination and hatred.

Let us cry to the God of Creation
for the peace and wellbeing of our world
and all her people.

Let us give thanks to God
for all those people who do work tirelessly for justice.
May God's hand strengthen them,
and God's presence surround them.

And let us offer ourselves to God
as living, breathing channels of peace.
Let us each one pray,
'Use me, Lord. Use me.' Amen

12. **Hymn:** R&S 344: God of grace and God of glory

13. **Blessing:**

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

May God bind us together as one Church;
may God bind us together as one humanity;
and may God be with us in the quest
to set all people free. Amen