

Dr Joy Mighty's Black History Month Address at St Mark the Evangelist
1606 Fisher Ave, Ottawa
10:00 am on Sunday, February 5, 2023

I want to congratulate you here at St Mark the Evangelist for observing Black History Month (BHM). I am deeply honoured to be invited to participate in your celebrations and thank you for your warm welcome.

You have chosen as the theme for your celebrations "Black in Canada: the Narrative and the Vision." I know you've been celebrating BHM for several years and must therefore be quite familiar with it. But before I share my perspective on this theme let's remind ourselves about a few important background facts.

First, WHO are "Blacks in Canada"?

- Blacks in Canada are people of African ancestry who live in Canada. They include 44% who were born in Canada, the ones (like my nieces and nephews) who understandably get quite annoyed when people keep asking them "where are you **really** from?" Blacks in Canada have 170 different birthplaces and over 300 ethnic or cultural origins. They represent 4.3% of the total Canadian population. This may seem like a small number but it is not an insignificant number. We're talking about almost 2 million people, and Statistics Canada projects that the Black population could represent nearly 6% of the Canadian population by 2036. Obviously, given their different backgrounds, experiences and paths taken to get here, there is great diversity among Blacks in Canada. Indeed, there is not a single narrative about Blacks in Canada, but rather many **narratives (plural)**.

Second, let us remind ourselves about WHY we observe Black History Month.

- BHM was established to **honour** the legacy of Black Canadians. It is a way of celebrating the value of Blacks to Canada and to our world; a way of acknowledging the enormous contributions to culture, science, the arts, politics, and every other field of human endeavor that peoples of African descent have made to the advancement of humanity since the dawn of civilization. BHM is about honouring Black excellence. It is about celebrating Blacks' resilience, innovation, and determination that have helped move Canada towards a more inclusive and diverse society. The impact of Blacks on Canadian society and the international community might be summed up in an old Jamaican proverb that says "we lickle but we tallawah" which can be interpreted to mean "we might be small but we are strong, powerful and influential". So, although Blacks are a relatively small percentage of the population, their impact has been relatively large and important.
- Blacks have been contributing to Canada's heritage and identity since the early 1600s with the arrival of the first recorded Black person, Mathieu Da Costa, who was a skilled interpreter of the Mi'kmaq language for French and Dutch explorers. But Blacks' contributions to the development of Canada have not always been celebrated or even acknowledged. In fact, they have mostly been hidden, underappreciated and undervalued.

- But in December 1995, Grenadian-born the Honourable Dr Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to Parliament, introduced to the House of Commons a motion that was carried unanimously to recognize February as Black History Month in Canada. It took as many as **thirteen** more years before a similar motion introduced by Senator Donald Oliver, the first Black man appointed to the Senate, was unanimously approved by the Senate and adopted on March 4, 2008, thereby establishing Canada's official parliamentary position on BHM. And that's how BHM has come to be recognized today as a **national** period of celebration for **ALL** Canadians to honour the legacy of Blacks in Canada.
- And Black History Month is not only recognized in Canada and the US. It is a global celebration in other parts of the African Diaspora, such as in Ireland and the UK where it is observed in October, and in the Netherlands where it's celebrated as Black Achievement Month. The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the years 2015 to 2024 the "International Decade for People of African Descent", declaring that "people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected". This is an implicit acknowledgement by the UN of past atrocities and anti-Black racism that peoples of African descent all over the world have suffered at the hands of others. It reminds us of the adage that "those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it". By acknowledging past truths, we can be guided by them as we attempt to eradicate anti-Black racism in the present, and ultimately to reimagine a transformed world without racism, a world in which there is equity, diversity and inclusion. This is the Vision of Blacks in Canada to which your theme refers.

Narratives About The Past

But this vision cannot be achieved without understanding narratives about the past. As the UN's declaration emphasizes, observing BHM is not only about celebrating the number of Black firsts or the excellence of Black contributions to civilization. It is also about encouraging us to accept the reality of the history of Black enslavement, colonization and other forms of subjugation, and to recognize and celebrate the resistance and advocacy that have freed us from such oppression. Lest we forget, it is important to recount a few of those narratives and the resistance that led to change.

- For example, such narratives must include the story of the over 4000 Blacks enslaved in Canada, as well as the story of the resistance by people like Marie-Joseph Angeliqne the Black slave in Montreal who was executed in 1734 for allegedly committing arson that burned down the Hotel Dieu Hospital and 45 houses, including that of her owner; or the story of Chloe Cooley whose resistance against being transported from Upper Canada (now Ontario) to be resold into slavery in New York led to the gradual abolition of slavery in the region. You have no doubt seen that Canada Post has just released the Chloe Cooley Commemorative Stamp to honour her for Black History Month 2023.
- Black narratives must include the story of Viola Desmond, the successful 32-year old Black business woman from Nova Scotia who, in 1946, was fined and imprisoned for daring to

challenge racial segregation laws by refusing to leave a whites-only area of the Roseland Theatre. In 2010, 64 years later, she was granted an apology and free pardon posthumously, and today her resistance to racial inequality is recognized by her portrait on the Canadian \$10 bill.

- Any narrative about Blacks in Canada must also include the atrocity of the destruction of Africville, a thriving close-knit community established in Nova Scotia for over a century by former American slaves who had been promised freedom and land. Instead, they encountered racial discrimination manifested in a lack of amenities such as sewage, access to clean water and garbage disposal, amenities given to non-Black Halifaxians. Such racism climaxed in the 1960s when the City of Halifax demolished Africville, displacing its residents in the name of urban renewal and industrial development. In 2010, through the ongoing resistance and advocacy of the Africville Genealogy Society, an official apology was finally issued to the Black community and to descendants of residents of Africville. The apology included reparations of nearly \$5 million from all three levels of government.
- Narratives of Blacks in Canada would be incomplete without the story of Sleeping car porters. These were exclusively Black men hired by Canadian railway companies to attend to every need of travellers aboard the luxurious Pullman sleeping cars that traversed Canada from the late 1800s until the mid-1950s. The porters experienced severe exploitation and racism. In contrast to their passengers' luxurious conditions, they endured poor, demeaning working conditions such as 21 hour shifts, sleeping on mattresses on the floor of the smoking room, and low wages. They were even denied the dignity of being called by their own names as each porter was called George after the inventor of the Pullman sleeping cars. Many of these men were highly educated, with university degrees, but because of systemic anti-Black racism, they were barred from other career opportunities and from higher positions in the railway companies. To improve their situation, the porters resisted, risking their employment and their lives by secretly organizing. They established unions and fought for better wages and working conditions. **Their** struggle paved the way for equality of opportunity and fair employment practices for **ALL** Canadians.
- As a final example, narratives of Blacks in Canada must also include the domestic workers who came to Canada under a recruitment initiative known as the West Indian Domestic Scheme that allowed young women from English-speaking Caribbean countries to come to Canada as domestic workers. From 1955 to 1967, approximately 3,000 women (including the previously mentioned the Honourable Dr Jean Augustine) participated in this scheme, often facing difficult working conditions and racial discrimination. But they played an important role in supporting the feminist revolution occurring all over the world, including in Canada, where white women were beginning to work outside the home, creating a need for domestic labour that was filled by Black women recruited through such programs. These women were crucial to the economic and cultural growth of countries like Canada. The wave of immigration created by this scheme extended beyond its official end in 1968 when Canada yielded to growing resistance and revised its discriminatory immigration

policies. Thus, Canada's policies on immigration and multiculturalism were developed partly out of the experiences of such women.

These are just a few examples of narratives about being Black in Canada. There are thousands more. Together they paint a picture, not only of the institutional racism and systemic discrimination that Blacks have experienced but also of their resistance to such oppression and the struggles that they undertook to ensure that others, especially their descendants, did not undergo the same experience. Their resistance, often with the help of non-Black allies, has contributed to legislation and policies on issues such as fair labour practices and employment equity, immigration, and human rights. So, resistance is very much a part of the narratives of Blacks in Canada.

The official Government of Canada theme for this year's BHM is ***OURS TO TELL***. But even as we tell these narratives of Blacks in Canada in the past, we need to be cognizant of the fact that being Black in Canada in the present is not much different. The specifics of the context may have changed with time, but the essence of the narrative remains the same. That the UN dedicated an entire decade to the promotion and protection of the human rights of People of African Descent is a reminder that the struggle for freedom, inclusion, equality, and justice is not a single event, like a 100 meter sprint. It is more like an ongoing marathon. The struggle to eradicate the systemic anti-Black racism in Canada continues today as seen in present narratives.

Summary of Present Narratives

These are evident in the statistics which, in summary, show that in Canada today Blacks are more likely to have lower employment rates, less household wealth, lower earnings, poorer health conditions, less access to good housing, good education, and other services and resources. Recent data from the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) communities have been disproportionately affected in terms of higher number of deaths, majority of job losses, and greater numbers in frontline work, to mention just a few of the pandemic's adverse effects on such communities.

Even without the pandemic, poor socio-economic outcomes point to the many systemic disadvantages that are still very much a part of the Black narrative today. Racism has had powerful destructive physical, psychological, behavioural, social and economic impacts on Black individuals and communities. It has resulted in the loss of economic opportunity and generational wealth, the internalization of oppressive and self-destructive beliefs, and intergenerational and transgenerational transmission of collective trauma which has often developed into complex post-traumatic stress disorders. And during BHM, it is important that we reflect on the atrocities endured as well as on the resistance and victories in overcoming them.

Of course, happily, narratives about Blacks in Canada also include stories of individual Blacks, like yours truly, who have succeeded and excelled, despite discrimination and racism. And BHM gives us an opportunity to hope for and envision a similar future for **all** Blacks in Canada.

This is where the second part of your theme becomes important. Thus far we've reflected on the first part – Black in Canada, the narrative. Now let's turn our attention to the second part – Black in Canada, the vision. What **IS** the vision of Blacks in Canada?

The Vision

One of today's readings resonated with me as particularly useful in helping us to understand the vision of Blacks in Canada. I'm referring to the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. It's a familiar reading for most of us, part of the sermon on the mount when Jesus gave us the Beatitudes. You know them well, don't you. Like me, you probably learnt them in Sunday School as a child, and of course they were last week's Gospel reading. Together, the Beatitudes constitute a powerful road map for us as to how we should behave as Christians and the future reward for each type of behaviour. Today's Gospel reading is a part of that same sermon. The entire Sermon on the Mount gives us hope for the future – not only about our salvation, but also about our relations with each other.

In today's reading Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. These are two powerful metaphors to describe who we are – our identity as Christians. **We - make - a - difference**, just as salt makes a difference and makes food tasty. And It doesn't take a lot of salt to make food palatable; in Jamaican lingo it may be "*lickle but tallawah*". Salt is important for good health and as a preservative to prevent bacteria. In ancient times, salt was also important because of its value as a commodity, as a method of trade and currency. It was referred to as "white gold" and soldiers in the Roman army were sometimes paid with salt instead of money. In fact, the word "salary" was derived from the word "salt ". So, when Jesus referred to the crowd as the salt of the earth, he was affirming their worth. He is affirming **OUR** worth.

And as for light, think of the difference that light makes to a dark room, or to the entire dark planet that we know as earth. **Light – is - a – big - deal**. But great as they are, salt and light do not exist for themselves. They only fulfill their purpose and make a difference for others when they are used. In verse 16 we are told: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Similarly, in verse 4 of today's Psalm, Psalm 112, the psalmist tells us that those who fear the Lord "rise in the darkness as a light for the upright." In short, just as physical light dispels darkness, so too we as Christians are urged to live as shining witnesses of God's light in a world darkened by sin.

This is especially relevant to BHM because, as past and present narratives of Blacks in Canada have shown us, racism is a sin that continues to darken our world. Jesus invites us – as both the collective Body of Christ and as individual believers – to be visible beacons of hope amid the darkness of racism, to be a light that ultimately points others to God.

This, then, is the vision of Blacks in Canada – to serve as the salt and light of the world, to be catalysts for change. As Mahatma Gandhi said "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." That you at St Mark the Evangelist have chosen to celebrate BHM suggests that you

too want to embrace this vision of Blacks in Canada. You too want to play a role in changing the world and ridding it of racism. And it will be up to you, both as individuals and as a congregation, to determine exactly what actions you will take to do so.

Embracing UBUNTU – the Ultimate Vision

Let me conclude by referring to my favourite African philosophy of UBUNTU to highlight my perspective on the ultimate vision of Blacks in Canada and elsewhere.

UBUNTU stands for collective “personhood” and means literally “I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am.” It is a concept of collective unity and it suggests that: “A person can only be a person through others”. The late Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained it best when he said “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together....Ubuntu is the essence of being human ... you can't exist as a human being in isolation.”

UBUNTU underscores our common humanity. Whether we are Black, white, red, yellow or brown - we are one human race. Period!

And UBUNTU is consistent with the many commands that Jesus gave us about being in relationship with our fellow humans: for example, he commanded us to be our brother’s keeper, to love one another, to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Celebrating BHM, then, is a way of acknowledging our interconnectedness and developing a deeper, more empathetic relationship with each other. It is a form of resistance against the anti-Black racism that has pervaded and divided Canada. BHM helps us move closer to the ultimate vision – achieving the collective unity of UBUNTU and enacting Jesus’ commands about neighbourly love.

May we who celebrate Black History Month serve as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, valued for shining a light on poverty, inequality, and social injustice, for striving to eradicate the anti-Black racism that creates these conditions, and for uniting us while celebrating our diversity.

Amen!