

Cambridge University Sermon: The gospel of liberation – Chine McDonald

The creators of the Slave Bible were selective about what they included in the Bible, lest the enslaved people got any ideas.

The Slave Bible's full title was: *Parts of the Holy Bible, selected for the use of the Negro Slaves, in the British West-India Islands.*

It was published four years after the Haitian Revolution – the only slave revolt in history in which the enslaved people actually won, driving out their European oppressors to create a new nation.

So those in the US and Europe who had grown fat off the toil of trading in black human flesh and lived very comfortably off the backs of enslaved people of course did not want their slaves to get any ideas.

Such was their paranoia that they decided to use the words of the Bible to reinforce the enslaved people's subjugation and leave little trace of the liberating truth of the gospel.

Gone was the Exodus – they didn't want the enslaved people to take inspiration from Moses leading the Israelites to freedom or hear his demands to the Pharaoh to: let my people go.

Gone was the passage in Ephesians which poetically highlights the equality of the kingdom of God. Neither Jew nor Greek? Deleted. Neither bond nor free? Excised. Neither male nor female. Erased.

There is no Book of Revelation: John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which evil will be punished and in which every tribe and nation will stand before God's throne. It's taken out so they can't imagine such a day even if it is after they have departed their mortal lives.

And yet enslaved people – even from what they read of the Bible that they had – got glimpses of the truth that the God spoken of in the Bible was a God who wanted to set them free – not just spiritually, but physically, socially, materially. That the gospel was a gospel of liberation, and that that liberation had real-life implications.

The real-life implications of the gospel find prominence in the black Church tradition.

This Black History Month, we remember those men and women – often people of faith – like Olaudah Equiano, Martin Luther King, Mary Seacole, Harriet Tubman - who have felt the pull of a holistic and life-transforming vision of human flourishing as described in the pages of scripture, rather than merely a theoretical or spiritual one. This liberation must first be made manifest in the mind, though, in the imagination. “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind,” says Marley's Redemption Song.

Some of the times in my life I have felt most that profound sense of liberation has been in worship services surrounded by black and brown people, sometimes in their thousands.

It is hard to describe the intensity of sound as the harmonies from thousands of different voices join as one to fill the cavernous space.

It sounds like pain – the sung melodies expressing the individual stories of the struggle for spiritual and material freedom; the struggle to survive, to thrive, to be and to exist in a world that did not recognise your value.

But it also sounds like victory – a tune of triumph, an overture of overcoming. Black churches can beautifully illustrate a gospel of liberation. Perhaps there is a special kind of unity and a special kind of liberation that happens when oppressed groups come together, a recognition of the struggle and the tenacity it takes to just keep going, to continue in the face of inequality, hostility and injustice.

There is something even more freeing because gatherings such as these take place away from the gaze of the perceived oppressor. Black church services become similar to the 'hush harbours' – spaces of retreat where enslaved people during antebellum America would secretly gather together to practise their religion away from the eyes of their white slave owners. These were places where the enslaved people could feel truly liberated, even for a brief period.

Slave owners, recognising the power that existed in these communal spaces, often in turn feared the hush harbours and would sometimes punish their enslaved people for attending hush harbour meetings.

It was in this secret place that the negro spiritual would be created, where the rituals, myths and stories about the African religions from which they had been wrenched intermingled with the Christian faith they had come to believe in. It was in this place, nestled under the protective cover of trees and sitting alongside riverbanks, that enslaved people would pray without ceasing with a fervency that was palpable. Here they could be free.

It was in this space that the enslaved could look to something bigger than themselves – both a divine Creator and a community of solidarity – to enable them to get through the unimaginable horrors, violence and oppression of their daily lives.

As Martin Luther King Jr once said: “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself.”

From the earliest days of Black Christian identity, the gospel has not been theoretical. It has been rooted completely and certainly in the real-life experiences that constitute the highs and lows of the daily lives of the worshippers. It has been an entirely embodied faith.

Black churches saw no distinction at all between their spiritual and their physical and political lives – between their souls and their bodies; they were one and the same. These Black churches have long been places of social justice and of resistance. It was Black churches rooted in the Word of God and huddled together in their hush harbours that were responsible for being the locations in which the majority of slave rebellions took place. When enslaved people got closer to God, they realised that God did not want them to be subjugated – either in this life or the next. This was in contrast to the predominant reading of the Bible put forward by slave owners – that the gospel could free your soul, but could not break your chains.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus aligns himself with the mission described in Isaiah 61, the passage we read earlier, which includes proclaiming freedom for the captives.

The prophetic poem here paints a picture of an as-yet unfulfilled future. It describes a picture of a saviour who is concerned not just with spiritual well-being but literal freedom – freedom from poverty, freedom from sorrow, freedom from captivity, freedom from mourning.

This week, following the unimaginable horrors perpetrated by Hamas against Israel and the horror those in Gaza now face, the future picture painted here feels more needed than ever and at the same time much further away than it has felt in a long time.

The image in this passage echoes the radical statement of Jesus in the Beatitudes in the sermon on the mount. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Neither the Beatitudes nor the Isaiah 61 passage is making a statement about a current reality. They statements of intent about how the world will be in the future.

Though they might seem illogical, unrealistic, far away, they describe a future that one can hope towards, even if this hope is an eschatological one. For enslaved people who gathered in hush harbours, their hope was in a future liberation and this is what they saw in the gospel. This future hope of emancipation could be found in the Negro Spiritual: songs of sorrow and songs of jubilee. Sorrow about their current pain and suffering and rejoicing about the freedom that they looked forward to once they had achieved their earthly liberation, the breaking of their literal chains, but also once they were free in the life that was to come. The life everlasting.

Such hope requires imagination about a future alternative to the current circumstance. Not just a leap of faith, but a commitment to picturing a future

reality as if it were already here. The prophetic tradition makes alive the “ministry of imagination”, as theologian Walter Brueggeman, writes. “Hope requires a very careful symbolization,” he says. “It must not be expressed too fully in the present tense because hope one can touch and handle is not likely to retain its promissory call to a new future. Hope expressed only in the present tense will no doubt be co-opted by the managers of this age.”

Jesus’s mission, his purpose – his *ikigai* as the Japanese describe a person’s motivating force – in the Isaiah passage is liberation for those who are in some way bound. But it is also the mission therefore of the Church, which is called to follow Christ’s example.

Brazilian liberation theologians and brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff answer the question: how are we to be Christians in a world of destitution and injustice? With this: “There can be only one answer: we can be followers of Jesus and true Christians only by making common cause with the poor and working out the gospel of liberation.”

But what is this freedom for? What must we do with it? And how might it change us? How might it change our world? This liberation has consequences. It requires spiritual and material change. It needs to make a difference.

For theologian Richard Rohr, the inner and outer liberation are interlinked. “In working for outer freedom, peace, and justice in the world, we discover the even deeper inner freedom of our True Self in God.”

But inner freedom and material liberation for us as individuals must also compel us to seek to create a world where there is liberation for all. “For to be

free is not merely to cast off one's chains," Nelson Mandela once said. "But to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

How can I be free if my brother or sister is in chains? How can I celebrate my own liberation when another is shackled? We are bound together in an inescapable mutuality. Each of us made in God's image and worthy of inherent dignity, worth, respect and freedom. "The function of freedom," therefore, as Toni Morrison once wrote "is to free someone else".

Jesus in Matthew's gospel says to his disciples that since they have received freely, they should in turn freely give.

What can this gospel of liberation then say to us in this one of the darkest hours of a generation? When it might seem like – as has been present in the Middle East crisis for many decades – one's freedom necessitates another's chains; our inescapable mutuality having been made evident in many, many years of conflict and with some having faced atrocities at certain periods in history on a scale we have never seen and pray never again.

Again, this gospel of liberation requires us to expand our imaginations. To see what is unseen and make possible what might seem illogical: an indefatigable hope in God, yes, but a commitment to bear each other's humanity, even in the face of the worst acts that humans can commit against each other.

[One Jewish writer and activist Arielle Angel](#) in recent days has reminded us of the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus in the Bible – the story omitted from the Slave Bible so that the enslaved people might not gain too much hope, nor ideas about their own liberation. Angel writes: "Even if our dreams for better have failed, they must accompany us through this moment to the other side.

We need to imagine a movement for liberation better even than the Exodus – an exodus where neither people has to leave.”

She quotes the Puerto Rican Jewish poet and activist Aurora Levins Morales and her poem Red Sea:

“We cannot cross until we carry each other,
all of us refugees, all of us prophets.
No more taking turns on history’s wheel,
trying to collect old debts no-one can pay.
The sea will not open that way.
This time that country
is what we promise each other,
our rage pressed cheek to cheek
until tears flood the space between,
until there are no enemies left,
because this time no one will be left to drown
and all of us must be chosen.
This time it’s all of us or none.”

For Christians, the gospel of liberation frees us spiritually, materially and physically. It requires us to look ahead to a future hope in which all of us will be made free. But in the meantime – in the now and the not-yet – may we be those who work for the liberation of others. Because this time it’s all of us or none.