



# WORSHIP RESOURCES

# FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM: A LITURGY OF REPENTANCE, COMMEMORATION AND COMMITMENT

By Iain Whyte

## Introduction

In this service, we will remember with penitence the evils of the Atlantic slave trade and celebrate the lives of those many unsung people who contributed to emancipation.

Tragically, slavery is not a story from history. There are 27 million slaves in the world today—more than ever before. We will be invited to commit ourselves to be 21<sup>st</sup> century abolitionists, working for freedom from slavery in our time.

In this place, we are hopefully agreed that slavery is incompatible with the Christian Gospel of love, which values every human being as God's child. But those Christians who worked to overthrow slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries did not always find the Bible an automatic ally and their opponents would often challenge them with scripture passages to justify their position.<sup>1</sup> Imagine the following conversation between James Tobin, a West Indian sugar planter, and James Stephen, an abolitionist around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

## Dramatic Dialogue

**Tobin:** Mr. Stephen, I see that you are one of the Clapham 'Saints'.<sup>3</sup> I take it that you know your Bible well. You cannot deny that God permitted the Israelites to take slaves of other races. The book of Leviticus makes that very clear.

**Stephen:** *There is no comparison between the domestic slaves kept by the Hebrews and the conditions being endured by field slaves on the plantations. You should read Exodus 5. It was from this same situation of cruel working conditions and repeated floggings that God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. That's the real parallel.*

**Tobin:** Even Abraham was permitted to use his wife's Egyptian slave Hagar, and God told her to return to her mistress and submit to her. (Genesis 16) The word of God sanctions taking slaves from other nations, yet you object to us buying heathen slaves from Africa.

**Stephen:** *To quote my good friend Rev. James Ramsay:<sup>4</sup> "Was Hagar taken in chains on a slave-ship and imprisoned in the hold for weeks on end, emerging starved and sick, to be sold on the block?" Once again your analogy doesn't stand up.*

**Tobin:** Ramsay was a menace. He stirred up the slaves by his fancy notions of their conversion and improvement. He should have minded his own business and simply preached the gospel instead of getting involved in matters that are nothing to do with priests. Jesus didn't condemn slavery—he even healed the slave of a centurion.

**Stephen:** *That is exactly what Ramsay did for Caribbean slaves. Until your friends drove him out. Jesus taught that the Law and the Prophets depended on love of God and love of neighbour as ourselves. And the*

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*neighbour in his own best-known parable was of another race. If slavery is so beneficial why don't you take a trip on the Middle Passage and then spend seven years toiling in the fields?*<sup>5</sup>

**Tobin:** Paul made it clear that slaves should obey their masters (Colossians 3:22) and he returned a runaway slave to Philemon. What do you say to that?

**Stephen:** *Paul also wrote that in Christ there is no distinction of slave and free (1 Corinthians 12:13) and encouraged the Corinthians to seek freedom rather than bondage. He instructed Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother. That's rather a contrast to the hunting of runaway slaves from your estates with dogs, and the lashes and chains you subject them to when they're caught.*

**Tobin:** The Bible is quite clear about God allowing slaves, and permits discipline to control them, which you wish to deny to us.

**Stephen:** *If you follow the instructions of scripture in the Old Testament, I suggest you read Exodus 21:26. It says that if a slave's eye or tooth is destroyed by the master's violence he must be released. If that were followed in the West Indies there would be hardly any slaves left.*

**Tobin:** It's all very well for you and your pious friends in Clapham to quote bits of scripture at me. But I'm a businessman. I live in the real world. I can't afford the luxury of idealism. All this petitioning of Parliament and boycott of sugar is dangerous nonsense. Our sugar plantations create the wealth that keeps this county advancing and if slavery were abolished we would all suffer. Ask any merchant; they'll back me up.

**Stephen:** *Not so! In March 1788 the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce declared in a petition to the House of Commons that they do not believe that the slave trade is as necessary or profitable as has been represented. And they went on, "Even if this were not so much the case, the feelings of your petitioners as men would overbear their opinion as merchants and lead them to sacrifice somewhat of the convenience and profit of commerce to the rights and principles of humanity."*

### Prayers of Confession

**Leader:** We confess that so much of our standard of living lies on the foundations of a system of slavery. A system that held human life cheap, destroyed families, transported human beings as cargo, and condemned millions to a shortened life of hopeless misery.

**All:** GOD FORGIVE, AND HELP US TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR PAST.

**Leader:** We confess that this system was conveniently accepted as commercial necessity and justified for centuries by religion; that it corrupted and brutalized our fellow citizens as sailors on slave ships or plantation overseers.

**All:** GOD FORGIVE, AND ENABLE US TO FIND A NEW SOLIDARITY WITH OTHERS.

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**Leader:** We confess that our standard of living still rests on slavery to debt endured by so many in our world. Poor people denied medical, educational and social facilities in order that their governments may repay interest to the rich world.

**All:** *GOD FORGIVE, AND INSPIRE US TO POLITICAL ACTIVITY FOR A JUST WORLD.*

**Leader:** We confess that we shop and bank uncritically, enabling profits to be made from children enslaved on cocoa farms or in rug-mailing factories, and men and women imprisoned in labour camps.

**All:** *GOD FORGIVE, AND HELP US TO USE OUR PURCHASING POWER RIGHTLY.*

**Leader:** We confess that all too often we close our ears to the cries of women, exploited in sexual slavery or domestic servitude because we don't want to believe that this can happen in our society.

**All:** *GOD FORGIVE, AND LEAD US TO OPEN OUR EARS AND RAISE OUR VOICES. AMEN.*

### Closing Responses

**Leader:** Sing praise to God all you faithful people!

**All:** *GIVE THANKS TO THE HOLY NAME OF GOD.*

**Leader:** For the tears of night have turned to joy with the dawn.

**All:** *AND YOU HAVE CHANGED OUR SADNESS TO A JOYFUL DANCE.*

**Leader:** We will sing of your praise and never be silent.

**All:** *O GOD, OUR GOD, WE WILL GIVE YOU THANKS FOR EVER.*

### Endnotes

1 A modern equivalent of this would be the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa whose justification for apartheid cited the inferiority of the sons of Ham as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water,' and the Tower of Babel as supposedly showing divine disapproval of racial mixing. South African church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak challenged these arguments on theological grounds in the same way as did the abolitionists two centuries earlier.

2 James Tobin was a leading planter in Nevis. He returned to England and became a spokesperson in the 1790s for business interests in the West Indies. James Stephen had worked as a lawyer in the neighbouring island of St. Kitts. He returned to Britain, married Wilberforce's sister, entered Parliament and drafted legislation against the slave trade and slavery.

3 A group of evangelical abolitionists who lived near to Wilberforce.

4 *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* by Folarin Shyllon, Canongate, Edinburgh, 1977.

5 Most West Indian slaves on plantations survived less than seven years.

# PRAYERS AND SONGS

Reprinted From **Reparations: A Process for Repairing the Breach**

*A study and discussion guide for local congregations, associations and conferences produced by Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Publications may be ordered from United Church of Christ Resources, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44114-1100; toll-free 1-800-537-3394.*

## **Prayer**

Dear God, Creator of the universe and all that inhabits it, we come as your church and as individuals in humble submission to your Word and your Way.

We come acknowledging our breach of covenant with you by the multitude of sins associated with the Transatlantic Slave Trade; we come recognizing the continuing legacy and consequences of those sins upon your people; we come on behalf of all those who were enriched and benefited from the Transatlantic Slave Trade; and we come remembering all those who yet cry out from their graves “do not forget my chains.”

God, you who are Alpha and Omega, the Almighty Judge and the Forgiver of Sins, we come with bowed down heads and contrite hearts on behalf of generations past, present and those yet unborn. We now ask that you forgive us and create in us a new spirit. Bind our hearts and send forth the healing power that you and your alone can give to us and this sin sick world. Bring us into reconciliation with one another and restore us to thy path. Amen

## **Prayer of Confession**

God of our mothers and fathers, we thank you that you have created the human community in all of our wonderful diversity; you have named us and claimed us and called us your own. You love us with greater love than we can ever understand or experience. You long for us to love one another as much as you love us. Throughout the centuries, you have continually reached out to us, calling us by name, yearning for us to trust you and live in your transforming love.

Today, we come with heavy hearts as we remember the horror of people stolen from Africa, forced onto ships where millions died in the inhumane conditions and the rest were brought to a new land as slaves. O God, the agony of people in chains, being bought and sold and used to build the wealth of this country terrorizes us still today. We ask your forgiveness for the unimaginable pain that lingers in the lives and souls of Black people to this day. ...

As churches and individuals we were too often silent as the power of personal and institutional racism grew and expanded. Today, we confess our complicity in what has occurred. We have been silent when we should have spoken, we have been indifferent when we could have cared and we have blamed others rather than ourselves for what has happened. With your overwhelming love, forgive us. Open our hearts and minds to recognize the ways in which we have participated in the systems that separate us from sisters and brothers and from you.

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Turn us around so that we will challenge racism and oppression wherever we encounter them. Put the words of apology on our lips and the power of change in our hearts. Lead us in the ways of reconciliation and reparation. Teach us the ways of dismantling racism in this day and time. May the commitments of our lives and the commitments of our churches make a difference as we seek to be your transforming and transformed people. In the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

### **Prayer of Repentance**

Holy God, we ask that the spirit of repentance reside with in our hearts; that you move us to forgive and to ask forgiveness; that you move us toward compassion and enable us to be compassionate to others; that you motivate us to see the humanity in others, even as we wish others to see the humanity in us.

God, we ask that you keep sacred the gift of life and celebrate the living of it; that if we appreciate life, we will appreciate the lives of others as well. God, continue to work with us and within us to help us to be a beloved and just community—the community that Christ has called us to be. For it is in the name of Christ that we offer this prayer. Amen.

### **Litany of Love, Forgiveness and Hope**

**Leader:** Our creator is the God of the Past, the God of History. Our Creator is the God of the Present, the God of Blessings. Our Creator is the God of the Future, the God of Hope. There were injustices done in your name. Some of your people were hurt. Not only were they robbed of their resources—money and land, but also of their dignity and even their lives.

**All:** *Help us never to use you name inappropriately again.*

**Leader:** We know you to be a God of love, kindness and mercy. We also know you to be a God of justice and peace. Help us not only to confess our past sins, but give us the strength to practice repentance. Help us to appropriately handle our past so that your people can move into a future which offers peace and justice for all.

**All:** *O God, remind us that this is your world and all we have has come from you. Empower us to help make this a just world for everyone. Help us to find ways to offer forgiveness, restoration, love and hope to all of your people. Amen.*

### **Invocation**

God of love, God of justice. We invite and invoke your healing and reconciling Spirit in this place. We pray daily that you reconcile us to one another in the same way that you have reconciled us to Christ. As we prepare to enter into this worship service, God, we do so with clean hearts and new and right spirits. Grant us reconciliation. Grant us wholeness. Grant us peace. For it is in the living, loving and liberating name of Jesus Christ, that we pray. Amen.

### **Prayer**

Eternal God, our Father and Mother, the One who has sustained us on this stony path. We give you thanks and praise for your sustaining Spirit that has been with us since the first shackles were placed

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upon the limbs of our African ancestors. You have been with us through the many hills and valleys. You have called forth modern prophetic voices who have risked life and limb on our journey toward freedom. In the midst of our struggle to repair the breach and build a new and just world, you have remained steadfast. We are grateful to be living at such a time as this, standing upon the shoulders of all those who have sacrificed that we might live. We have not yet achieved a just society and our hearts continue to cry out for justice.

Eternal One, we call upon you to help us to acknowledge our shortcomings and to turn away from sin to righteousness. We ask that you challenge us to find ways of repairing the breach and restoring the injured. Help us as we seek restitution. Help us as we seek restoration. Sustain our spirit. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

### **Bridge the Gap, Mend Broken Places**

This hymn in support of reparations for slavery, is written in a popular lyrical **meter** (8.7.8.7.D) that enables it to be sung using many different hymn tunes.

Bridge the gap, mend broken places,  
Heal the wounds of long ago.  
Tragedies ignored won't leave us.  
Painful his-t'ries must be told.  
Slave-ry still ensnares God's people.  
Even now, race wars we fight.  
Generations past have lived it.  
Still today, we glimpse their plight.

Policies of old diminish  
persons and communities.  
Chains of economic bondage  
keep God's people less than free.  
Health care, housing, education  
prove injustice ages old.  
For the sake of liberation  
we must make our witness bold!

What's been sewn in hate, unquestioned,  
what's been buried seeks the day.  
What's been hid will be uncovered.  
God will judge and make things right!  
Reparation, true confession,  
calls us to repair our ways.  
Sins of forebears, named and reckoned—  
Our true path to greater days.

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We, who follow Christ's compassion,  
we, who love for Jesus' sake,  
must reclaim the way of justice  
must make good the claims we make.  
True repentance seeks new vistas,  
higher ground on which to stand.  
Sacrificial love seeks justice,  
heals all people in this land.

Reprinted From **Set All Free: Act to End Slavery**

*Five week Bible study. Churches Together in England 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH Tel: 020 7529 8141 E-mail: [info@setallfree.net](mailto:info@setallfree.net)*

### **Prayer of Confession**

O God of our forbearers, who in every generation sets us free to live the life for which we are created,

We confess that we have not accepted that freedom as we ought.  
We have not accepted it for ourselves, neither have we set others free.

We have enslaved our sisters and brothers through our thoughts, our words and our actions.

We are very sorry for the misuse of your gracious gift, and we ask your forgiveness and your help to live in true freedom. For it is only when we are truly free ourselves that others are set free.

### **Absolution**

May our God who led the slaves out of slavery into new life, with forgiving love lead us in out of our bondage that we may experience the joy of the eternal life given us in Christ Jesus, our liberator.  
Amen.

### **Prayer**

Lord God, those of us who have no personal experience of slavery can weep or rage over the stories we've heard and read. But we can have no true realization of the terror, the despair, the agony of mind and body, the grief of those who are enslaved, and of the families from whom they are separated.

But we know that you, God, hear the cries of those who call to you for help, so we join our prayers to those who are praying out of that situation, asking that you will inspire us all to work together for true freedom so that Isaiah's great vision of broken-hearted people being cared for and of captives being set free, will come true. And to you be the glory. Amen.

**Prayer**

Creator God,

In your hands you hold the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains, for all Creation belongs to you.

Grant us peace to cherish your world and wisdom to nurture its resources.

Save us from the desire to control what is not ours and the impulse to possess what is there to share.

Give us insight to see where power is abused and courage to speak out where truth is negated.

Guard us against complacency in the face of arrogant destruction and ignite us with holy rage where fires of conflict are fanned by greed.

Forge in us hearts of gold to meet suffering with compassion and wills of iron to challenge injustice with purpose.

Inspire us ever to search your ways and find new paths that we may join hands with friend and stranger to unearth justice and find lasting treasure. Amen.

# A SIMPLE LITURGY CHALLENGING RACISM

By Yousouf Gooljary

[Excerpts taken from *Holy Ground: liturgies and worship sources for an engaged spirituality*. Compiled by Neil Paynter & Helen Boothroyd. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications. pp. 204-207. 2005.]

## Introduction

**Leader:** Racism is a sin against God and against our fellow human beings. It is contrary to the justice and the love of God. It destroys the human dignity of both the racist and the victim. Let us condemn racism in all its forms.

## Scripture Reading: Mark 7: 24-30

*Scripture Reflection*

**Voice 1:** Rereads Mark 7:24

**Voice 2:** Jesus moves from his country to a foreign land, from his comfort zone to a place outside his ethnic security.

**Spoken response:** *Lift us beyond the burdens of pain and guilt.*

**Voice 1:** Rereads Mark 7:25-26

**Voice 2:** Jesus does not want to get involved. He tries to keep a low profile but is confronted by a stranger pleading for his help: someone of a different nationality, a different ethnic origin, a different religion. A woman.

**Spoken response:** *Build our memories into life-giving resolutions.*

**Voice 1:** Rereads Mark 7:27

**Voice 2:** Jesus answers her harshly.

**Voice 3:** I am from a different ethnicity, a different cultural background. I have to look after my own.

**Voice 2:** Why does Jesus respond like this? Is he leading the woman? What does he expect her to say?

**Spoken response:** *Give us the vision of a new creation.*

**Voice 1:** Rereads Mark 7:28

**Voice 2:** The woman responds courageously.

**Voice 4:** I may be a different religion, a different ethnicity, a different colour, a different gender, a different culture, but I have rights also. I am entitled to something. At least give me the crumbs.

**Spoken response:** *Strengthen us to act for justice and human dignity.*

**Voice 1:** Rereads Mark 7:29-30

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**Voice 2:** She has risen to Jesus' challenge. Now he treats her as an equal and gives her more than she had dared to hope.

**Voice 3:** Your daughter is healed: fully, completely now. I do not give you the crumbs. I give you the whole banquet. For you too are a child of God.

**Spoken response:** *And set all free.*

### **Prayer for God's help and healing**

**Leader:** Redeeming God, in a world of violence we acknowledge our own selfishness and prejudice, which are contrary to your all-embracing love. Help us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with Christ, in respect for all your children.

**All:** *WE PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION; WE PRAY FOR HELP AND HEALING.*

**Leader:** Gracious God, mindful of our own need for your forgiveness and grace, enable us to be challenging yet compassionate towards those who show bigotry and commit racist violence. May their hatred and prejudice be overcome through the strength and liberation of your redeeming love.

**All:** *WE PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION; WE PRAY FOR HELP AND HEALING.*

**Leader:** Caring God, your Son Jesus showed solidarity with the weak and vulnerable. Touch with your love all those who have been the victims of racist violence. Heal their wounds of body, mind and spirit and lead them on the journey to justice and reparation.

**All:** *WE PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION; WE PRAY FOR HELP AND HEALING.*

**Leader:** Liberating God, you offer freedom to all people. Send your Holy Spirit to strengthen the victims of racist bullying, threats, persecution, and abuse. Break the bonds of fear and isolation, and empower us in our struggle.

**All:** *WE PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS AND REDEMPTION; WE PRAY FOR HELP AND HEALING.*

**Leader:** Reconciling God, help us to overcome all our ethnic divisions. Increase our understanding of how to develop a truly inclusive culture. Most of all, this day and every day, challenge us to challenge racism.

**All:** *AMEN.*

### **Closing responses**

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**Leader:** God of justice, give us voice, take away our fear; shake up our prejudices and move us to a different place, so that we may stand on common ground with those who struggle for justice.

**All:** *TEACH US LOVE. TEACH US COMPASSION. ABOVE ALL, OUT OF LOVE AND COMPASSION, TEACH US TO ACT.AMEN.*

**Sung blessing:** "The peace of the Earth be with you" (Common Ground)