

[Reported for the Anglo-African.]

SERMON BY REV. W. JOHNSON  
ALSTON.

[The following sermon was preached in St. Philip's Church, in this city, on Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> of September—on the NATIONAL FAST DAY—by the minister in charge, the Rev. William Johnson Alston; he hoping that the humble explanation and exhibition of the Divine Word may lead us all to right thought and action in this trying crisis through which we are passing:—]

Isaiah, 58: 6, 7. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?"

Beloved brethren and hearers, is not the question, viz: Why have we assembled ourselves together been and perhaps even now is struggling for audible—verbal expression? Feeling that such may be the case, we hasten to give what we deem to be a reasonable answer to the anticipated interrogation. And the first is, viz: That our Chief Magistrate, the President of the United States has been solicited by the unanimous voice of Congress, both of the Senate and House of Representatives, to

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proclaim and set forth a day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer!

2<sup>nd</sup>. The Governor of the State of New York, coinciding with the expressed wish of the President, has called upon the loyal citizens to observe the same.

3d. That every citizen of our Modern Babylon might observe this fast, our Mayor has issued a proclamation requesting a strict observance of the day; and for this end he has sent a circular to all the heads of departments in the city, especially asking "that they will close their offices and shops to-day" (this we quote from a city paper).

4<sup>th</sup>. Our chief officer in the church—the Bishop—have sent a request to the clergy under his jurisdiction to open their churches for the observance of the fast, and also appointed the portions of Holy Scripture, &c., for the same—among with the 3d chapter of the prophecy of Jonah, which we read as the first lesson for this morning. The other lesson from the Old Testament is the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, from which our text is taken.

Now this is done on the part of our National, State and Church Officers, viz: That it may be with us as a nation it was with the inhabitants of the great city of Nivevah who were threatened with destruction by reason of their great iniquity! Hence Jonah in obedience to the Heavenly Command exclaimed aloud within that city, viz:

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"Yet forty days and Nivevah shall be overthrown! So the people believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them even to the least of them. And the king said "let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands."

And the king gave his reason for so doing, viz: "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not!" Then as an evidence of the sincerity of their repentance we read in the verse following, viz: "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not!"

Now in this striking example, of the Nivevites, we see the forbearance and long-suffering of God towards sinful people and nations, viz: that they are spared from impending Divine judgments on their timely and sincere repentance.

But the question may have arisen in the minds of not a few among ourselves, viz: Why should colored people in the loyal States observe the fast? Here let us ask ourselves the question contained in the geography of the country, viz: "What forms the American Nation? the answer is the whole of the people of the United States."

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Now this answer gives a reason for our observing the day—we are men! As colored citizens of the United States, we are, or should be, deeply interested in the struggle going on in the land, as we shall at once see by looking at the cause of the trouble—which is African Slavery—as now being fully admitted by all! The free people of color in the North, as a race, are identified with the enslaved, and we suffer by reason of that identification; because slavery has cursed every descendant of Africa, we all feel the weight of that curse upon us to-day, and that it will so continue until the shackles of the inhuman system are broken, and every man enjoy the heaven-born gift—Freedom!

But again, as colored citizens, we should be interested in the great National conflict now going on, because the signs of the times are ominous of good to the slave! They indicate that his galling chains and fetters are loosening and that the foundation of the brutal Institution (to master and slave) is giving way! and like the once giant of the forest (the oak) from the effects of age, incapacitated to stand the howling storm and wind, like a drunken man reels and rocks and is now ready to fall!—to which every colored man, woman and child, and also every true philanthropist, from the bottom of their heart can say, amen, amen!

Hence all men of every race should wel-

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Hence all men of every race should wel-



come the fall of slavery.

But do American citizens ask why?—  
we answer still in addition to what we have  
already, viz: Because the existence and con-  
tinuance of African Slavery in America is  
contrary to the spirit and genius of the Declar-  
ation of Independence and the Constitution  
of these United States. The former is the  
foundation of the latter; therefore the same  
spirit pervades and breathes through both,  
and the spirit is seen in the following clause  
of the Declaration, viz: “We hold these  
truths to be self-evident, (so plain that the  
mere child may understand) that all men  
are created equal, that they are endowed by  
their creator with certain inalienable rights,  
that among these are life, liberty and the  
pursuit of happiness.”

All men are created with an equal right  
to employ their faculties of body or of mind  
in such manner as will promote their own  
happiness either in the present or in the  
world to come. That every man has the  
right to use his own powers of body or of  
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he do not use them so as to interfere with  
the rights of his neighbor. And he, there-  
fore, who for the gratification of his own  
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of the most High God!

The system of slavery being contrary to the spirit and genius of the Declaration and Constitution of the United States, is therefore contrary to the views and designs of the framers of these instruments of freedom. Jefferson and Madison, as also the fathers of our country, including George Washington, their leader.

To get a true idea of the preciousness and worth of freedom, on the part of the fathers of our country, notice the force and effect of his words, who by them fired the breast and nerved the arms of his country men to break their fetters and cast off their yoke of bondage, viz: "As for me give me liberty or give me death!"

George Washington showed clearly what were his views on the subject of African Slavery, in that before his death, he was careful not to let death overtake him with his own and the responsibilities of others at the bar of judgment where men must give an account of the deeds done in the body while upon earth and be accordingly rewarded or punished, he made arrangements for the emancipation of all of his slaves.

Having been engaged in the holy war of freedom, and achieved a triumphant victory, he has left on the page of history his bright example concerning the enslaved.

And that example had, for a while, its proper and intended effect—State after State

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declared its slaves free, until the spirit by which Washington and the Revolutionary fathers were actuated by, died, and a spirit diametrically opposed, have taken its place, a spirit that craves to blight and curse the whole land!

As an evidence of this, to-day as a nation, we are in a state of rebellion and actual warfare.

All with unerring certainty may trace the origin of our present National troubles to that section of our dearly blood-bought country, where the children who have been nourished and brought up and protected by kind parents, have actually risen up against the Government and the holy principles upon which it was founded, viz: Religious, Political and Civil liberty—and doubtless but for a lack of true principle on the part of ourselves in the free States in going to combat with the enemy, the success which crowned the Revolutionary fathers, would have long ere this, been the heritage of the great Northern army.

But beloved brethren and hearers, let us not despair, but on the contrary, [be] encouraged to hold up our head that we may behold with joy the visible hand of Divine Providence in this matter.

From the long and uninterrupted existence of slavery in the land, as a National Institution, we have become basely corrupted in morals; for our wealthy and influen-

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tial citizens, in both sections of the country, (with some honorable exceptions) just previous to the fall of Sumter, were a unit on the subject of slavery, whereas to-day, contrary to the most distant expectations of both sections, we are divided and in battle array, each against the other. We are to-day suffering under one of the worse calamities that ever [befell] a nation, [viz: At] war with itself!

And He in whom we live and move, and have our being, has taken the matter into His own hands, because of the injustice of our rulers, both in the State and the Church. Hence He says to us by His servant, Jeremiah, viz., "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the Prophets prophesy falsely, and the Priests bear rule by their means, and my people love to have it so; and what will ye do in the end whereof?"

And since our civil and religious authorities have failed to deal justly with their fellow-men, all of them, so as to conform and harmonize with the teaching with "the first and great commandment, to love the Lord our God with all the heart, mind and strength, and the second, which is like unto it: to love our neighbor as ourself.

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The Almighty seemingly has taken the matter into his own hands to show that while He ordinarily makes use of men as humble instruments to accomplish His



righteous ends upon earth, yet He is at the same time wholly independent of man.

And, my hearers, to-day the American nation is convinced of this fact. We all, rulers and subjects, begin to realize that God exercises power over the affairs of heaven and earth.

We have an unmistakable evidence of this in the fact of our being assembled here, and the purpose for which we are gathered together, viz., at this very moment the loyal part of our Government are, as it were, bowed before heaven in "sackcloth and ashes!"

By this very act we acknowledge that we have sinned against God, and violated the laws of humanity. Our position is a becoming one, but oh, unless there is something more than form in this matter, unless our hearts are sincere, we but aggravate our guilt by attempting to mock him, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. Let us remember that "Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." So that those words in the chapter from which our text is taken, may not be applicable to us, viz., "Behold ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fists of wickedness; ye shall not fast as ye do this day to make your voice to be heard on high." But on the other hand may our hearts be in perfect harmony with the spirit and teaching of the

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text, viz., "Is not this the fact that I have chosen to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh!"

In the first place the plain and practical lesson to be learned from the text on the part of the now acknowledged Chief Magistrate and his constituents is, to declare the general act of Emancipation throughout the length and breadth of the country, so that the 4,000,000 of slaves may in the first place be brought to the liberty of manhood, physically and intellectually; so that, secondly, they may be brought to the liberty of the glorious gospel.

Again, the plain practical lesson taught by the second verse of the text seems to apply most happily to our rulers respecting their conduct towards the poor fugitive in his flight from oppression and chains, and panting and fainting for the glorious boon of freedom. The text warns us not to continue as we have been, and are at present doing, viz., seizing and rending him whom God has created in His own image, and after his likeness, back to his cruel oppressors; but on the contrary to supply his

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wants, to take him out of the position of [a] brute, and to place him in that of a rational and intelligent and accountable being, remembering that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth. Hence we all are brethren[!]

These, beloved, are the lessons which, if received and practically carried out, will redeem the nation from the threatened destruction, and soon we shall be entitled to the remark made respecting Great Britain and her West India emancipation, viz., "Time, which develops the freedom that act created, adds continually to its luster; and long after England's highest achievements in acts or in arms shall have been forgotten, this grant of liberty shall testify to the grandeur of her power, and to the magnanimity of her people."

Oh! nation threatened with ruin from on high hearken to, and for our salvation, comply with His words as seen in the text, where He seems to speak to our President and his loyal subjects, viz., "Is not this the fast that I have chosen to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke[?]"

And to encourage us so to do, He in the eighth verse tells us what will be the happy result, viz., "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteous-

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ness shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward! then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and He shall say, "Here I am."

Finally let us all bear in mind the solemn fact that no expressions of humiliation can make that man a true penitent who does not "loose the bands of wickedness!" That no man's faith justifies him which does not "work by love," and that he who loves God will love his brother also. Indeed the consciousness of our love for the whole human race, and especially those of the household of faith, this is to the Christian one of the unmistakable evidences of his acceptance with the Father, true discipleship with our blessed Saviour, and in communion with the Holy Ghost. If, therefore, we love our brother in the heaven-taught sense of the term, we shall not dare to enslave, or in any way wilfully or intentionally injure him, but on the other hand strive to elevate and do him good.

And, beloved, if we, as a part of the oppressed, have our hearts and minds conformed to the will of heaven and the spirit and teaching of the text, though we may not go personally into the field and heat of the battle, yet even here, and at our family altar, we may have power with Him in whose hands are the destinies of all things and all men.

Do you ask how? We answer—By

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Do you ask how? We answer—By



humbling ourselves before Him in deep humiliation, fasting and prayer.

See the case of the children of Israel in their flight from their cruel oppressors in Egypt. Behold the effect of the prayer of Moses to God in their behalf. The enemy was in their rear; on either side were impassible barriers, and in front was the Red Sea! But in this dilemma Moses, their leader, cried unto God in prayer, and in answer to that faithful supplication the sea was divided, and a highway of escape was opened up for them!

See again the instance of St. Peter by his enemies cast into prison, and the time set for his execution, but the Church prayed for him, and in answer to which an angel came down from heaven and liberated him.

Lastly see the case of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi. At midnight they prayed and sang praises to the Most High God, and the foundations of the prison were shaken, their place of confinement was opened, their bands broken, and they were by Divine power liberated.

In our prayers let us remember the bond, as bound with them, to the glory of God, and their temporal and spiritual salvation for the Redeemer's sake, Amen!

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