

Why Bother with Black History?

Pr Les Ackie

I was recently asked why the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the UK does not emphasise Black History Month. I speculated a number of reasons. Maybe we don't appreciate the relevance of black history for our everyday lives and our Christian experience. There is also the mistaken view that black history is only for black people. Possibly, the main reason is the fear that talking about issues related to black history will stir up racial tensions. I can appreciate why some might want to avoid the subject.

I recall watching Alex Haley's TV series *Roots* in the 70's and going to school ready to fight because of the sense of injustice and anger it stirred in me. Studying some aspects of black history are emotive and maybe ought to come with an advisory warning, "SOME VIEWERS MAY FIND THE CONTENTS DISTURBING". However, the fact that an issue is challenging should not prevent us from addressing it with tact and maturity, especially if that issue impacts our capacity to live authentic lives and live out our Christian faith.

So why highlight black history? W.E.B. Du Bois said that, "Without a sense of history, we are like a tree without roots." History not only roots us in the past, it also determines who we are now. Social critic James Baldwin said, "History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. We must not pretend otherwise." It is of vital importance that we grasp this reality because our history impacts us whether we realise it or not. The Bible makes it clear that we can pass on negative patterns of thinking and behaviour from one generation to another. Numbers 14:18 refers to the iniquity of the fathers being passed on to their children to the third and fourth generation.

Iniquity, in this context, refers to a predisposition to distorted thinking and negative behaviour. Ellen White also refers to "cultivated and hereditary tendencies." Research has shown that not only can we pass on trauma through what we model, but also through our DNA. As one trauma specialist put it, "the body keeps the score." As a result of our experiences, we can pass on spiritual, psychological and emotional legacies, including legacies of trauma. Whatever affects people's psychological and emotional health may also adversely affect their capacity to see themselves as princes and princesses of the kingdom and their ability to live as kingdom people.

In her excellent book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Dr Joy De Gruy presents a compelling argument to support her belief that many descendants of the African diaspora, are still suffering from the legacy of unprocessed trauma. She makes the case that it would be reasonable to assume that a significant number of African slaves would have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is a mental health condition in which an individual re-lives a traumatic event as if it is happening in real time. Dr De Gruy's assertion is reasonable when the conditions that give rise to post traumatic stress are considered. Bearing in mind the horrific and incessant abuses of slavery and the injustices that followed in its train, we would be naïve to presume that such a level of generational trauma

would have no lasting impact upon black individuals and black families, because slavery was as much an assault on the mind as it was on the body.

Historian Carter G Woodson, who originated the concept of what would become Black History Month in the 1920s, wrote in his book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, “If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one . . . In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit.” Such mindsets illustrate the impact that can result from generational trauma unless something intervenes to break the cycle. Dr De Gruy contends that generational trauma has left a legacy of self-hatred, anger, low expectation, poor relational skills, that often result in self-denigrating behaviours. She advocates that the way to break the cycle is to process the trauma through positive socialisation, especially of black youngsters, within positive nurturing relationships.

Traumatologists assert that trauma does not just disappear by itself, it must be processed. As Christians, we can offer a spiritual process that requires awareness of our inner pain, a willingness to embrace the pain, and a healing grace in which God holds us through the pain. What does not kill you does make you stronger, but only if you allow Him to wrap His loving purpose around it. It is significant and a miracle of faith that one of the primary factors in the resilience of African slaves and those who had to deal with the aftermath of slavery, was their faith in God, and their understanding of the concept of redemptive suffering. Many held on to their belief in a God who suffers with His children.

The positive socialisation that Dr De Gruy advocates includes teaching an accurate account of black history because distorted history along with scientific racism have long been used as tools of oppression to compound the traumatic legacy of slavery. Nigerian historian, Chinua Achebe stated, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

Scientific racism classified Africans as sub-human and characterised them as “lazy, crafty, slow, negligent, foolish, governed by impulse.” While scientists were laying the foundation for racist ideologies, historians played their part by their attempts to expunge Africa’s rich history. If the evidence was allowed to show that African people were not inherently inferior, if they had the capacity to build the Sphinx, build the pyramids, create great nations, innovate in the fields of mathematics, architecture, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, language, and if they were inventive, if they had the same moral capacity as every other ethnic people, then slavery would become untenable. So, rather than allow the truth to be exposed those who had a vested interest in the slave trade tried to get rid of the evidence. In addition to the manipulation of history and scientific racism, the Bible itself was twisted to suit the narrative that black people were condemned by divine decree to a life of servitude. The so-called “Curse of Ham”.

Black civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in the USA, says that the false narrative that black people are inherently intellectually and morally inferior, also characterises black people as predisposed

to criminality. The penny dropped for him when he was in court sitting at his table waiting for a case to begin. The judge came in, took one look at him and said, "Hey, you can't be in here without your lawyer, go and wait outside until your lawyer arrives."

He reflected that if the judge could take one look at him in his best suit and assume that he was a criminal, what chance would a black defendant have in his courtroom? Prejudice and racism are a reality in this country also. However, the standard for racism is not the overt hatred of the British National Party or the English Defence League. It is the institutional and structural racism in which resides the power to adversely affect the lives of black people. Such racism is more often than not founded on unconscious biases that operate below the level of mindful awareness. It is important to appreciate that it is not necessary to be a card-carrying member of the UKIP to have prejudiced views about people of colour.

In his book *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela recounts getting on a flight to Addis Ababa, and the fear he experienced on seeing a black pilot and thinking to himself, "How could a black man fly an airplane?" We all have implicit biases about other people and the only way to overcome those biases is to recognise them and then challenge them. Otherwise, we will perpetuate the distorted narratives that underpins them.

It is the failure to honestly and courageously readdress the narrative of racial inferiority that has contributed to a society in the UK in which blacks are six times more likely to be stopped by police; nine times more likely to be imprisoned for comparable crimes; more likely to be sent to prison for first time offences; six times more likely to be held under the Mental Health Act; three times more likely to be unemployed; more likely to be discriminated against in housing; more likely to live in poverty; less likely to be offered university places in spite of better predicted grades and qualifications; as graduates, earn 23% less than white counterparts; and remain underrepresented in managerial positions.

Considering the research, we must come to one of two conclusions. Either the narrative about black people being inferior is true or we are still living in a society that is institutionally and structurally racist, propped up with views about black people that have their roots in outdated stereotypes.

Bryan Stevenson, argues that no nation or community can truly become a champion of social justice until it confronts its past abuses. An example of this is our own Andrews University. Just this year in February, a representative committee of black students posted a YouTube video called "It's Time" calling on the administration to acknowledge and apologise for past and current racial injustices and inequities. Under the courageous leadership of Dr Andrea Luxton, the university posted its own video response with an unequivocal apology and commitment to address the legitimate expectations of black students. It has followed up that apology with action by appointing a Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion. The point is that if we want to heal in the present, then we have to deal with the past - the good, the bad and the ugly. An awareness of black history is an important facet of healing the legacy of trauma from the immoral

trafficking of African slaves because change can only take place as we become aware of how our past may be bleeding into our current attitudes and behaviours. This is vital because the legacy of slavery has not only adversely impacted the worldview of the decedents of slaves, but also the the descendants of slave owners. We all must heal together.

The purpose of studying black history is not to elevate black history over any other ethnicity's history. History is not a competition of one-upmanship, "My history is better than your history". I agree with actor Morgan Freeman's assessment of Black History Month when he asked, "Why do you want to relegate my history to a month?" In an ideal world, black history would be part of a balanced curriculum and dialogue that is less concerned with perpetuating a Eurocentric bias and more concerned with teaching truth that is culturally relevant to practical living today. We need to teach black history because black history is an important facet of British history and human history.

A study of black history is important because people do not experience Christianity in a vacuum. They experience it within the context of their culture and the more they understand their culture, the more effectively they can contextualise their faith. Black history opens up an understanding of the Bible and illuminates the role that people of colour have played in salvation history. In the process, we can give children and young people a wider spectrum of positive role models to inspire their aspirations.

It is important to study black history because, in the words of a great leader, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you will see." Studying black history is not an end in itself. When Jesus said "the truth shall set you free" (John 8:33), He was not referring to a mental assent to the truth, but a reception of Himself as the way, the truth and the life (John 4:6). Without a knowledge of the truth-Giver, intellectual truth will make us bitter not better. When God liberated Israel from Egypt, their physical freedom was not His priority. His command was, "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Exodus 5:16).

The correct teaching of black history can be an effective tool for promoting hope through adversity, highlighting the resiliency of the human spirit and role God continues to play in inspiring hope for a better tomorrow that springs from the harsh lessons of the past. It is a hope that grows from understanding, from truth and from the power of love. It is vitally important for all of us to realise that nobody need be a prisoner of a traumatic history. The words of the Apostle assure us that we can transcend our history. Paul states, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).