

## **“Emancipation Day”**

**Scripture: John 14:5-10.**

**Rev. Stephen Milton**

**July 31, 2022**

Tomorrow is Emancipation Day.

It is a new holiday, created by the federal government last year.

It asks us to remember and celebrate August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1834, when slavery became illegal in Canada, and the rest of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> Black Canadians had lobbied for it for many years.<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason it is so late in coming about is that most Canadians are unaware that Canada even had slavery. That’s something we associate with the Americans. But the truth is that Canada, like the United States, was founded with the use of slave labour. In New France, the French enslaved Indigenous people in cities like Montreal, and they also imported Black people to serve as slaves. One of them, Marie-Joseph Angelique, was blamed for burning down most of Montreal in 1734. The charge that may have been fabricated, but her desire to escape from her owner was real, as was her hatred of being enslaved.<sup>3</sup>

Indigenous people and Blacks were enslaved because Europeans had convinced themselves that people with white skin were genetically and morally superior to all other races. This was the Big Lie that white people across Europe and North America agreed to believe in. Whites justified the cruelty of slavery by pointing to the Bible, where slavery is assumed, not condemned. Stories about the curses laid against Cain<sup>4</sup> and Noah’s grandson<sup>5</sup> were used to justify slavery on the basis of skin colour.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/emancipation-day.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://bcblackhistory.ca/emancipation-day-in-canada-past-present-and-future/>

<sup>3</sup> Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives*, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibram X Kendi, *How to be an Anti-Racist*, 50.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Goldenberg, *The curse of Ham: race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003) 147; 199-200.

When the British took over what is now Canada, they preferred Black slaves to Indigenous ones. So, Black people were brought in from the US, the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>6</sup>



### Street names 1

Many of the founding fathers of Toronto were slave owners, and their names can still be seen on our streets.

### Street names 2: peter

If you walk down to a baseball game downtown from Queen, you go down Peter Street, which becomes Blue Jays Way. Peter Street was named after Peter Russell, a slave owner. He owned three 4 slaves, a mother, Peggy Pompadour, and her three children: Jupiter, Amy, and Milly.

### Street names 3: Jarvis

The Jarvis family, of Jarvis Street fame, owned at least 6 slaves.<sup>7</sup>

### Street names 4: Dundas

Dundas Street is named for Henry Dundas, a British MP who in 1792 convinced parliament to delay abolishing slavery in the British Empire.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robyn Maynard, 20-1.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Bunch, "John Graves Simcoe's weird relationship with slavery," Spacings Magazine, SEPTEMBER 5, 2017; <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/jarvis-street-slavery-1.3564667>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/community/recognition-review/renaming-undas-street/>

Jarvis<sup>9</sup> and Peter Russell<sup>10</sup> helped to water down an anti-slavery bill here in Ontario in a year later. The result of these men's actions, along with others, was that slavery was not abolished for another 40 years, in 1834. Many of us do not know about the history of slavery in Toronto, but we do know the names of the men who kept slavery in business. Only now is The City of Toronto is considering changing some of these street names to disengage our city from celebrating the reputations of slave owners.<sup>11</sup>

Emancipation Day seeks to remind us of our past and to celebrate the end of slavery in Canada. However, it is also clear that the attitudes which made slavery did not end on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1834. Even among Christians who wanted slavery abolished, racism was alive and well. White Christian abolitionists could argue that the cruelty of slavery was against Christian values, but that did not mean that they thought highly of Blacks or Indigenous people. Abolitionists were often just as racist as slave owners. Slavery was defeated, but the attitudes which made it possible lived on.

It is a terrible irony that just as the institution of slavery was being dismantled in Canada, the first residential schools were starting. The first one in Ontario was created in Brantford just three years before slavery ended.<sup>12</sup> Churches ran these schools, which grew in numbers in the decades to come. The reason churches were in charge was that churches had established many of the first schools in the province for white people, so they were a natural choice for Indigenous schools. But there was another reason: churches believed that the only way for people to get into heaven was to be converted to Christianity.

They were guided by many passages in the Bible, perhaps none as famous as today's scripture reading. In the gospel of John, Jesus is speaking to his disciples shortly before his arrest. He says those famous words,

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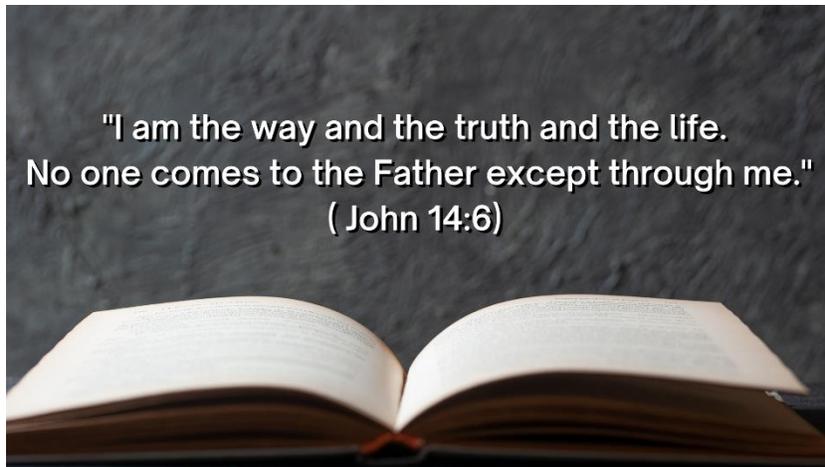
<sup>9</sup> <https://jarvisarchives.ca/main/history/jarvis-who/william-jarvis-and-slavery/>;

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/jarvis-street-slavery-1.3564667>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.russellmuseum.ca/peter\\_russell.htm](https://www.russellmuseum.ca/peter_russell.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/community/recognition-review/renaming- Dundas-street/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools>



Jesus is telling his disciples that if they know Jesus and have learned the wisdom of Jesus, then they already know God the Father. Jesus is God's Son, who reflects the will of God in everything he does, according to the gospel of John.

This was a radical shift in the understanding of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God was terrifying. Anytime God drew near, mountains would begin to quake and melt (Psalm 97:5). When Moses asks to see the face of God, God says that to grant that wish would be to destroy Moses. Instead, he is given permission to see his backside only, and even then, only if he hides in the crag of a rock. (Exodus 33: 17-23) When Hagar thinks the angel, she is speaking to is God, she exclaims that she has seen the face of God and lived. (Genesis 16:13) In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is too awesome and powerful to ever meet face to face. But in Christ, that all changes. God is presented in human form in the person of Jesus. Some people can tell that he has a divine presence within Him, while others are oblivious. Many mistake him for a regular rabbi. Only a select few see that He has God's power to work miracles and even control the weather. The revolution of Christianity is that God appears in a form that is not fatal to mere mortals. We are given a way to be with God in human form.

That's the good news – the bad news is that Christians have often taken this to mean that non-Christians are destined to eternal darkness and hellfire. If the only way to get to God is through Jesus, then those who do not know Jesus, or reject Jesus, are in deep trouble. That's the way Catholics saw their faith at the time when the Spanish started exploring the New World. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI declared in a Papal Bull that the Spanish explorers had permission to conquer any land they found in the New World provided it was not already inhabited by

Christians.<sup>13</sup> This meant that the Indigenous People had no rights to their own land. It also meant that the Spanish were duty bound to introduce the Indigenous people to the Christian faith to save their souls. This was known as the doctrine of Discovery. It was the blueprint for the takeover of the Americas by the Spanish and was later endorsed again by Protestants and Catholics alike to justify the need for religious schooling of Indigenous people. They had no right to their land, and without Christianity, they would also lose their souls.

This week, Pope Francis travelled to Canada for a long-awaited meeting with Indigenous people. He had promised to come four months ago when Indigenous leaders had met with him in the Vatican.<sup>14</sup> His arrival has been keenly anticipated. The Catholic Church ran 60 percent of the residential schools in Canada.<sup>15</sup> They had played a major part in the school system and had failed to pay compensation to Indigenous people after promising to do so.<sup>16</sup> Most of all, Indigenous people here wanted to hear the Pope apologize for all the harm the Catholic Church had done through the residential school system.



When the Pope spoke on Monday in Alberta, his words were met with great excitement and anticipation. He expressed his sorrow over the suffering caused by the schools.

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<sup>13</sup> Full text: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Alex06/alex06inter.htm>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-04/pope-francis-meets-with-canadian-indigenous-peoples.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Pope's apology leaves 'deep hole' by blaming individual Catholics for residential school abuses, says former TRC chair," APTN, July 26, 2022

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/catholic-dioceses-funding-residential-school-survivors-1.6524231>

He stated clearly that the cruelty of the schools did not reflect Christian values and God's love.

Many Indigenous people are deeply touched by his words and find them very powerful and cathartic. But not everyone is happy. One of the chair people of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair, said that the Pope had not gone far enough.<sup>17</sup> Sinclair noted that the Pope condemned the actions of individual Catholics, but did not state that the Catholic church as an institution had done anything wrong. The Pope seemed to be apologizing for the actions of individual Catholics, a few bad apples, but took no responsibility for the church's role in running the schools. The implication is that the residential schools were a good idea, but some Catholic employees acted inappropriately. The Pope also suggested that the church was simply providing a service for the federal government, which should take the blame for the misguided nature of the residential schools.

Judge Sinclair and some other Indigenous leaders have called for the Pope to denounce the 1493 Papal Bull that created the doctrine of Discovery.<sup>18</sup> They argue that the Catholic Church created the premise on which colonization was built, a doctrine that was used to justify the slave trade as well as the residential school system.

At the base of all of this is a key theological question: is belief in Christ the only way to reach God? Are the souls of non-Christians in trouble? That was the idea that justified colonization. There are still many Christians who believe Jesus's words should be understood literally, that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Ironically, Pope Francis has been very clear that he does not believe that Christianity is the only path to God. Our most recent United Church creed, the Song of Faith, agrees<sup>19</sup>. There are many paths to God, and Christianity is just one of them. That understanding has been the reason the United Church of Canada has been so willing to engage with Indigenous people. We see their spirituality as worthwhile in its own right, as a different but valuable path to God. We may hear

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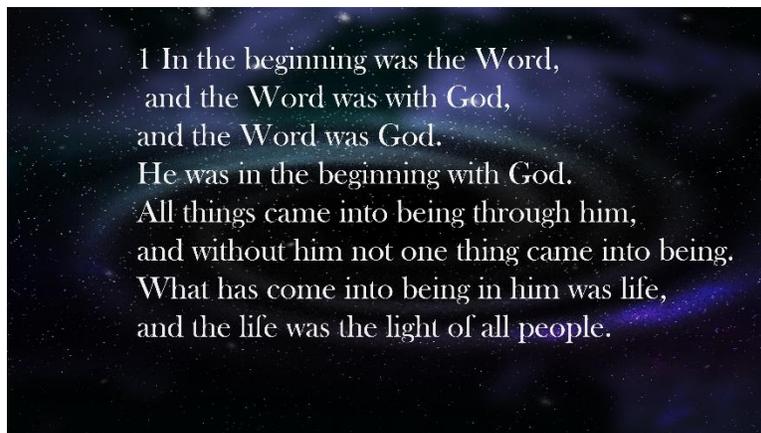
<sup>17</sup> "Pope's apology leaves 'deep hole' by blaming individual Catholics for residential school abuses, says former TRC chair," APTN, July 26, 2022

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/07/27/pope-francis-heading-to-quebec-and-next-leg-of-penitential-visit-to-canada.html>; **more**

<sup>19</sup> <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe/relationship-and-inclusion>

more about this in the next three years as our newest moderator, Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne, is an Indigenous woman.

To some, this may sound like politics is trumping Biblical truth. Jesus doesn't sound ambiguous when He says that the only way to know the Father is through the Son. But we need to be careful not to read Jesus' words out of context. Jesus makes this statement in the Gospel of John. That Gospel begins with these famous words:



This person, the Word, is part of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Son. The prologue says that "All things came into being through him" – that is, every aspect of reality was birthed by the Son on behalf of God. This is the cosmic Christ, the sacred power that animates all of creation. It is this person of God, the Word, who decided to pay us humans a visit as Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago.

When we're told that none gets to the Father except through the son, another way of saying that is no one gets to God except by knowing the cosmic life force which animates the universe. That knowledge of God was known by the Jews, long before Jesus was born. People all over the world have sought out the sacred force of reality, the Word, without ever having heard of Jesus of Nazareth. I have been told by Indigenous people that when they read these words, they realize that they were already in relationship with God long before the Europeans arrived. God's presence as Manitou, the Great Spirit, was well known to them. The teachings of Jesus could be useful, but they did not need them to be saved. They already knew God.

Tomorrow is Emancipation Day, a time to celebrate the end of slavery. But the work of emancipation continues. Slavery has ended, but the racist and colonialist attitudes and doctrines which made it possible live on. Emancipation is not possible until the dignity of every kind of person is recognized and celebrated. The idea that one group of human beings is superior to another must end before true emancipation will be possible. That means seeing humanity through God's eyes. It means to see each one of us as made in God's image, a precious creation, each unique, each valued by God. Until all are free, none of us will be free. God bids us to continue the work of emancipation each day, until the streets of every city tell the story of freedom realized, emancipation become real.

Amen.