

Hinde Street Methodist

Sunday 19 October 2025

Bible passages: Jeremiah 31 27-34; Luke 18.1 8

A sermon for Black History Month

Good morning. It's a pleasure to see you this Sunday as we celebrate Black History Month. I am delighted that I was asked to preach today to mark Black History Month.

I will use the terms African and Black interchangeably.

A bit of history.

The celebration of Black History began in America in 1924, initiated by historian Carter G. Woodson. He was concerned about the scarcity of historical information regarding the contributions of Black people to American life. He announced what was then called Negro History Week in collaboration with The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and selected February to align with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (12 February) and Frederick Douglass (14 February), both of whom were vocal advocates for African American rights. The official observance was established in 1976 when President Gerald Ford formally recognised Black History Month, making it part of the list of American celebration observances.

In Britain and Ireland, Black History Month began in 1987; it is based on the same fundamental reasons as in the United States, where the contributions of Black people to the country's evolving history have often been unrecognised, marginalised, or overlooked. It also became vital for the Black (African) community, which faced questions of identity and belonging in a country that was either unwilling to acknowledge or ignorant of their presence, role, and achievements.

Prominent advocates of Black History Month in London encompassed Akyaaba Addai-Sebo, who migrated to Britain from Ghana as a refugee in 1984. He received support from Ansel Wong, a cultural and political activist from Trinidad and Tobago, and Ken Livingstone, the former leader of the Greater London Council (GLC). Ansel Wong held the position of Principal Race Relations Officer at the GLC.

Why Black history, you ask? Our history is rich in Scripture and in the accomplishment of this nation that we call home.

We (Black and White) need to learn and remember our past to live in the present and to plan for our future. By understanding and fully accepting who we are, (Black and White) then and only then, can we freely embrace all of mankind as equals knowing we "(26) ... are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (27) For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for

you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (**Galatians 3:26-29**)

Today, I want to revisit Biblical history and highlight the role of Black people in God's redemptive plan, which is often overlooked, marginalised, or ignored in Biblical discourse. If you attend events this month, you'll hear about the exclusion of Black/African people from British history and how this damages society. When asked to preach for Black History Month, I decided to shift from discussing the omissions of achievements of Black people in Britain to exploring the roles of African/Black people in Biblical times. So, I conducted my research.

I was born in a country where Muslims and Christians live closely together. As a young person, I was asked if Christianity was for Africans. In Brixton, where I worked for over twenty years, I met many Black people from various religious and political backgrounds; intelligent individuals who asked if I felt comfortable in a religion often seen as European. I want to highlight the often-overlooked presence of Africans in the Bible and Christian history, which we don't learn in lessons. There's much to share from Genesis to Revelation, but I can only give a few points for us all to learn.

In Genesis 2:13, the river Gihon is described as encircling the land of Kush, situated in present-day Sudan and Ethiopia. The river in the Garden of Eden alludes to Africa's importance in early Biblical history. After the flood, Noah's descendants—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—spread across the world, including parts of Africa such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Libya, and Canaan. Biblical stories highlight Africa's vital role, with figures like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Solomon, and others having connections to the continent.

In about two months, we will celebrate with carols and passages from the Bible about Jesus Christ's birth. We will recall how King Herod tried to kill the newborn in the manger, but an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him, "Arise, take the young child, his mother, and flee to Egypt." When Herod sought to kill Jesus, God guided him to Africa for safety.

Let me specifically introduce a few names:

Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, mentioned in Jeremiah 38:6-13 and 39:15-18, was an African who helped the prophet Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, during his imprisonment. Jeremiah was thrown into a dungeon due to his prophecies, left for dead and unsupported. Ebedmelech approached King Zedekiah, begged for Jeremiah's life, and, with thirty men, used rags and ropes to rescue him. Because of his faith and effort, God saved Ebedmelech from Jerusalem's fall and commended his trust during dark times. His actions exemplify faith—defending God's prophet, resourcefully rescuing him, and receiving God's promise of deliverance, leading to salvation for both Jeremiah and himself.

The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-39 offers a strong example of seeking truth. Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, encountered an important Ethiopian official who was

reading Isaiah. He heard the gospel, accepted Jesus, and brought Christianity to Ethiopia. Acts 8:38 mentions Philip baptising him, demonstrating Africa's early Christian roots before Europe. He was the first non-Jewish convert in the 1st century AD.

3. Niger and Lucius of Cyrene (today's Libya) are mentioned only once in the Bible (Acts 13:1), highlighting their leadership in the diverse, mission-focused church of Antioch. As prophets and teachers alongside Barnabas and Paul, they served humbly through prayer and fasting, obediently sending out Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary trip. Their example shows humble leadership, fulfilling the Great Commission.

You know that when Jesus was carrying the Cross for his crucifixion, a man was forced along the way to help him. That man, Simon of Cyrene, was an African. Mark 15, verse 21, (also: Matthew 27: 32; Luke 23: 26) says a man named Simon from Cyrene was passing by and was forced to carry the cross. Cyrene was in North Africa, which is modern-day Libya. When Jesus was at his weakest, an African man was chosen to carry the cross for the Messiah. That's a powerful message.

These are just a few stories about Black people in the Bible. Many others are nearly forgotten, like Moses' wife Zipporah, who was a Cushite, an African woman. You might recall how Aaron and Miriam criticised his marriage to her in Numbers 12, and how God responded by punishing Miriam with leprosy for her racism.

Finally, I want to briefly (re)introduce three African Christian fathers who shaped early Christianity.

1. Tertullian from Carthage (present-day Tunisia) was the first to use the word Trinity, defending its doctrine against Arian Christians.

2. Athanasius of Alexandria defended Christ's divinity against heretics and contributed to the establishment of the Nicene Creed. As we mark the 1700th anniversary of the creed this year, we should never forget that this African theologian championed the doctrine of the Trinity. Without him, this doctrine might have been lost.

3. St. Augustine of Hippo continues to influence Western Christianity. Augustine was born in what is now Algeria. His theological contributions laid the groundwork for much Western Christian thought, including the Doctrine of Original Sin and the Just War Theory. He depicted the Church as the city of God, distinct from the earthly city. He is revered in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Before Constantine's conversion in 312 AD and the declaration of Christianity as the empire's official religion, churches existed in Africa. The expansion of the Roman Empire and the subsequent destruction of African churches led to a decline in Christianity in North Africa. To make matters worse, the Arab Muslim conquest in the 7th century caused further destruction of churches and forced many Christians to convert.

Additionally, I want to mention the slavers involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade from the 15th century. They produced what is known as the Slave Bible. I encourage you to look it up online; you'll be shocked at how far humans have gone to oppress other human beings. The Slave Bible is held at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.; there are two other original copies in this country.

I also want to draw your attention to a twist some people have added to the story of Noah and his sons, particularly Ham. Some have firmly claimed that Noah's son Ham was cursed by his father to be subservient and enslaved. I invite you to study the account of what happened between Noah and his sons, and to see who it was that Noah cursed. You will find that Noah actually cursed Ham's son Canaan, not Ham. Look it up.

Many years ago, when I was asked why I am a Christian instead of a Muslim, I didn't have the deep Biblical knowledge and understanding I possess now. So my usual response was that I inherited the religion and that I believe in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Today, it is different because I now have the Biblical evidence to support my Biblical inheritance. Those who questioned me then might have been influenced by the way Christ is often depicted as a European figure, rather than the pre-15th-century images that show him with a Mediterranean or North African appearance. This Sunday, celebrating Black History Month, let's open our hearts and minds to our shared responsibility to pursue justice, gain insight, and show respect and honour to one another through actions that make the world a better place.

Let me turn briefly to a passage of scripture we heard earlier: Jeremiah 31:27-34.

A young boy was riding his tricycle wildly around the block, again and again, repeatedly. Eventually, a police officer stopped and asked him why he was going in circles. The boy said that he was running away from home. Then, the police officer asked why he kept cycling around the block repeatedly. The boy replied, "Because my mum said that I'm not allowed to cross the road." (Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Baker, 1989, p. 253)

Obedying rules helps us maintain strong relationships with loved ones. Christians believe that the new covenant, foretold by Jeremiah, was fulfilled through Jesus Christ. This connection with God, based on grace, love, and care, became tangible when Jesus lived and died among us. His sacrifice demonstrated how much God was willing to do to restore us to Himself.

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's unconditional love for us.

God didn't have to send Jesus.

Jesus didn't have to come.

But a new covenant was necessary, a covenant where God would be our God and we would be God's people,

not because we have to, but because we want to,

not because we can keep the Law perfectly

but because we seek to love God, with God's help, to the best of our ability.

We are part of a family where our relationship is symbolised by sharing a table and having a meal together. Our Lord Jesus Christ has freely given the substance of that meal.

In a few minutes, we will come to this table as God's people.

We come as members of the family of God.

We come as members of the new covenant.

We come as recipients of grace, love and forgiveness.

We come in relationship to the One who provides the table.

We have a relationship with all who eat from it here and worldwide.

We come as those who have received the hope promised so long ago by Jeremiah.

It's enough to boggle the mind when we honestly think about it.

Don't you agree?

I conclude with how I started:

We (Black and White) need to learn and remember our past to live in the present and to plan for our future. By understanding and fully accepting who we are, (Black and White) then and only then, can we freely embrace all of mankind as equals knowing we "(26) ... are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (27) For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (**Galatians 3:26-29**)

In the name of God, the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen