

Sermon Transcript

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 16, 2025

Blessed are Saquon Barkley and Jalen Hurts. Blessed are the Eagles, Eagles fans, and the whole city of Philadelphia. Woe to anyone who says different! Amen!

Wait, I think that might not be what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel. Actually, I think he's saying something completely opposite to that.

What does this mean for those among us who rooted and cheered last Sunday, who went to or watched the parade Friday, who are right now having a moment of joy and pride? Is Jesus saying, too bad, folks, you will be crying next season! Is Jesus even saying, the Chiefs are the real winners here, and they will triumph in the end? Or maybe it's the Cowboys?

OK OK, really I don't think Jesus had sports in mind when he preached this sermon. But this message does seem hard, painful. Are we not allowed to be happy when things are going well for us? Why would the less successful go to the head of the line? What kind of message is this, Jesus? It sounds suspiciously like DEI.

Wrestling with this difficult message brought to mind someone we are celebrating this week, our hometown Philly Episcopal saint, Blessed Absalom Jones. Absalom, who we lift up, because of his triumph in becoming the first Black person ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, but we also lift up the many struggles he had to endure to get there.

Absalom Jones, who was born enslaved. Absalom who worked to buy his wife's freedom, then worked more years to save for his own. Absalom, who once he had that money, had to lobby and petition his enslaver for more years until he was allowed to buy his freedom.

Absalom, who along with Richard Allen, grew the Black membership of St George's Methodist Episcopal Church, which at first pleased the white leaders of the church,

until it felt like, hmm, a little too much, and they decided that Black congregants would need to worship in the upstairs gallery where they would be less visible.

Absalom Jones, who said no to that insult, said no to that exclusion, Absalom who walked straight out of that church with Richard Allen and the rest of the Black parishioners of St George's.

Absalom, who founded St Thomas' African Episcopal Church, but even then it was not easy. He had to lead the church as a lay reader for years before he was ordained a deacon, then seven more years before he would be ordained a priest.

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were called on to do something hard during the deadly Yellow Fever epidemic of 1794, when George Washington, his cabinet, and most of the mayor's staff fled the city. The mayor and Benjamin Rush pleaded for help, and Absalom Jones and Richard Allen led efforts to clean the streets, care for the sick, bring the living to hospitals and the dead to be buried.

They risked their lives to help the Black community in Philadelphia who were especially affected by the epidemic, and, as we know from our experience with HIV and COVID, to help everybody, because viruses don't seem to stay in just one affected community for long.

Blessed Absalom, who was born so poor he didn't own his own body. Blessed Absalom, whose intellect and courage and persistence and faith and sense of himself were so great that he could not be held back by the forces of hate and exclusion. Blessed Absalom, who helps us see the lie in what we are being told right now about DEI, that it somehow rewards people who are less qualified.

Blessed Absalom, who shows us the deeper truth in Jesus' message. That when we choose to stay in our comfortable place, like the white members of St George's, we are poorer in the end, poorer in a way that has wounded the Church to this day. That when we risk ourselves, when we side with the poor and hungry, when we go out into the streets to care for the vulnerable, we end up saving ourselves too.

Blessed are you who are poor.

Blessed are you who are in detention, who are afraid to go to work, who carry your papers with you at all times because your accent or skin make you a target.

Blessed are you who have lost your job, or don't know if you have a job any more, or feel like your life's work has gone up in flames.

Blessed are you who have been erased off of web sites and history books and monuments.

Blessed are you who are isolated from your own family or community, because you voted for this, or because they did.

Blessed are you who feel confused, exhausted, angry, and helpless these days.

Blessed are you who are questioning your faith, who are wondering where God is right now.

Blessed are you when despite the pain, division, confusion and fear you are feeling, blessed are you when you act in love anyway. Blessed are you when you march, when you write letters, when you speak out, even when you are not sure it will make a difference. Blessed are you when you call someone you know, someone who is vulnerable, someone you may even disagree with. Blessed are you when you pick up the phone and say, how are you doing? And then you listen.

Blessed are we when we search our souls and reflect on the ways we have contributed to keeping the poor poor. Blessed are we when we try to make a change, when we try to act different. Blessed are we when we can glimpse that we are all one body, and we will only become healed, we will only become Blessed, together.

St Martin's, know that Jesus' Gospel message is made for times like these. Know that when we are right in the muck and despair and weeping, we are right there with Christ, we are right at the threshold of the Kingdom. That when we don't know what to do or say, when things are impossible, when we feel powerless, when we can't even agree on a common language, that we are right smack in this difficult and life-giving Gospel. St Martin's, let us in these times hold each other close, talk to each other when it's hard, listen to each other, act when we can. Blessed are you. Amen.

