

Text

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down....

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What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

History

In 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered the keynote address at the Ladies’ Antislavery Society’s celebration of Independence Day in Rochester, New York. Douglass, who had escaped from slavery at the age of 20 and published his autobiography detailing the brutality of slavery, was one of the nation’s leading orators and the nation’s most prominent abolitionist.



At the time of Douglass's speech, the Mexican War (1846-1848) had expanded U.S. territory to the Pacific Ocean, adding all or part of what became nine Western states. Their addition precipitated a conflict over the westward spread of slavery, which led to the Compromise of 1850, a series of five laws addressing slavery in the newly acquired territories. One of these laws, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, provided for returning escaped slaves to the South without trial and required citizens to assist in apprehending runaway slaves.

Within this historical context, Frederick Douglass took to the podium. He was aggrieved not only by slavery itself, but also by the corrosive effect of hypocrisy. To observe a ritual celebrating "freedom" in a time of rampant oppression was to treat the country's core ideas cheaply. Therefore, in his remarks, he turns July 4, the day which our nation celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence, into a confrontation with the country's failure to live up to the ideals espoused in that document.

Values to Appreciate in the Text

- Freedom
- Equality
- Honesty



For context on this speech – 1852 is 76 years after the Declaration of Independence. It is 9 years prior to the start of the Civil War and 11 years prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. The Civil War ended in 1865.

The above text is a small sample. I am sending along the full version as well.

In the full version he speaks more about the founding of the nation and its development. He talks about the ideals on which it was founded and developed. He celebrates the history and the people involved.

The speech turns from the a celebration of the past to looking at the present - and reminds them of the promise of liberty of which he is not a part . Slavery is still active. He quotes from Psalm 137 – "By the rivers of Babylon…" Written by the Hebrew exiles who had been removed from their homeland and sent to another country. He then talks about the experience of slavery and the continuing reality. (Note that England had outlawed slavery and the slave trade by this point – 1834).

It is hard for me to imagine how the words of the Declaration of Independence could be taken seriously and the slave trade still persist. "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These words do not fit with the practice of enslaving other human beings.

He also challenged them – and us – on how much more needed to be done to live up to those high ideals. In particular he calls on the church – on God's people - to fight for the rights of all people – and particularly the slaves. The church and Christians were very active in the anti-slavery movement in England.

This is not easy reading. It is given here for us to think about our heritage, our history and the development of both our country and the church. We need to listen to and learn from history. We can celebrate the great that has been accomplished. We can also work and pray for all of us to live into the ideals which are a part of our heritage.