

Matt 3.1-12 Red and black
4 Dec. 2022 Advent 2A
St. Martha & St. Mary's, Leuven
By: Stephen Murray

In the 1840's, church doors along the Eastern coast of North America began to be painted BRIGHT red. This had nothing to do with any liturgical colour. It was a secret sign of safe harbour for escaped slaves as part of the Underground Railroad. They referred to the Book of Exodus, when Hebrew slaves painted their doors red with lamb's blood, so that the plague of death would Pass-over their homes. This horrifying act finally convinced Pharaoh to, "**let my people go.**"¹

After the American Civil war, slavery was abolished... in theory. But even now, 160 years later, racial injustice in America and elsewhere remains an open wound.

One way that African-Americans were continually taught that they were '*inferior*' was through a popular form of entertainment called '*Vaudeville*', which uses songs and short plays to comment on social issues through humour.

A common feature in Vaudeville was known as '*blackface*'. It was forbidden to have Black actors on stage, so white performers would smear their faces with black paint, leaving only large pink lips. Blackface characters spoke with strange accents and silly voices to show their supposed lack of manners and education. They tripped and fell down and lacked normal physical coordination like some kind of wild animal. But they were also terrifying and were often portrayed as murderers and rapists, who were then defeated by the white hero.

Blackface is still considered one of the most offensive and racist acts in North America.

So, let's talk about Sinterklaas.

Now, just to be clear: Sinterklaas is not racist, but racist things have been done in Sinterklaas' name. Just like Jesus is certainly not evil, but evil things have been done in Jesus' name.

And the problem for us is: Sinterklaas is **not** just another children's story. He IS a religious figure. He wears a bishop's mitre and carries a bishop's staff, for goodness' sake!!! So, we cannot just say '*no comment*' or '*stay in your lane*'. This IS **our** lane!

For starters, Saint Nicholas – Sinterklaas – Santa Claus – was originally from the southern coast of modern-day Turkey. Try searching the interwebs for images of an old Turkish man whose complexion is as pink and as pale as Sinterklaas. I couldn't find any.

Details of St. Nicholas' life are sketchy, but we do know that he was bishop of Myra in Turkey at the turn of the 4th Century. And he was famous for being generous. In one story, Nicholas heard of a poor man with 3 daughters who couldn't afford dowries. Nicholas tossed a bag of gold coins through the window for each daughter. Which is why some Christmas traditions still involve leaving chocolate gold coins in a stocking.

In another story, Nicholas prevents 3 innocent sailors from being put to death by a Roman general. He shields them with his body, breaks their chains with his staff, and stops the general's horse in its tracks. Does that sound like the kind of person who sends naughty children to Spain as a punishment for bad behaviour? I wonder what would it be like if our modern Sinterklaas celebrations had some kind of connection to life of the real Saint Nicholas?

But, of course, the Sint never travels alone, does he? He is always accompanied by his helpers - the Pieten. Well, almost always. Germanic celebrations for Saint Nicholas involve men dressed in animal furs with giant horns and hooved feet, representing the evil demon '*Krampus*'. Early European art shows Nicholas surrounded by tiny red devils. (*Not the Belgian football team*) And of course, over time, the colour of those little red devils changed to a different colour. You might've noticed I have avoided saying it – Zwarte Piet. Black Peter.

¹ 'Go down, Moses' African-American spiritual

Who is often portrayed by white men in Blackface paint.

When I was the Chaplain at the Anglican Church in Gent, the majority of the congregation were from an African background. I cannot tell you how many of the children and young people cried, or complained about the Sinterklaas celebrations at their school because they got called 'Zwarte Piet'.

Well-meaning adults have tried to explain that Piet is simply the Sint's helper, and that his face is black because of chimney soot. *'Let's not get upset everybody. Let's be logical and rational. After all, it's just our tradition, our culture.'* Except, no culture exists within a vacuum. And certainly not in a globalised world of images on Instagram, TikTok and SnapChat. Besides, Jesus had rather clear warnings for his followers about adhering to traditions that held God's people captive, rather than setting them free.

Symbolically, the colour black is often associated with death, ignorance, or evil. So, the unspoken message given to those beautiful children in our churches is that the mean, old, white bishop on the horse was good. And they, through no choice or fault of their own, happened to be born with dark skin, making them – ignorant fools, or evil demons?

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing could be further from the original message of Saint Nicholas. And maybe saddest of all is that this is not a complicated problem like achieving peace in the Middle East. This could be changed tomorrow, if we wanted.

In today's gospel reading, John the Baptist cries: *'Repent!'* In other words, 'turn around', *'turn AWAY from sin, and turn TOWARDS God.'* And so, repentance seems like a good place for us to start, to re-examine our traditions and habits. To ask ourselves about the unspoken messages our symbols and actions communicate to others, especially children.

John the Baptizer goes on to say, *"Prepare the way of the Lord."* It is a Way of living that the Prophet Isaiah described as so full of righteousness and faithfulness that wolves and lambs, leopards and deer, lions and oxen live together in peace. There, it is impossible to do harm – a child can play with a deadly snake without fear of being killed.

The Way of the Lord sounds so beautiful and yet so foreign. If we lived this new WAY, then, categories like white and black would no longer matter. Churches wouldn't need to paint their doors red. There would be no need for violence, oppression or slavery. The need for one side to win, so the other side must lose - would be eliminated.

The Way of the Lord that we are called to prepare is a way where all people of every colour can join in the old spiritual song made famous by Martin Luther King Jr., *"Free at last, thank God almighty, I am free at last."*² Amen.

² "Free at last" African-American spiritual