



Praying with the Spirituals

Discovering the deep meaning within African American Spirituals

From the syndicated column "The Prayerful Heart"

By Julie McCarty

Over my head, I hear music in the air. . . .

There must be a God somewhere.

--From an African American spiritual

This year, I'm celebrating Black History month by learning about the African American sacred music form called "the spirituals."

Growing up in a rural community of upstate New York, my experience of the spirituals was rather limited, to say the least. But with the civil rights movement underway, I remember learning songs such as "This Little Light of Mine," "Down by the Riverside," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" in public school. I recall the enthusiasm I felt when "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was sung with the inclusion of my godmother's name at the reception for her solemn profession as a nun. I felt the power and sacredness of Eucharist when we sang the spiritual "Amen" in my college years.

As an avid music student, I enjoyed these songs. However, I didn't fully recognize that the spirituals, song-prayers covering the full gamut of human emotions like the psalms of the Bible, were composed by American slaves. Unlike so many other "folk tunes," these song-prayers came from a people torn mercilessly from their homeland, forced into harsh oppression, stripped of their cultural heritage, and often made to endure various sorts of physical or emotional abuse.

A recent book, "The Trouble I've Seen: The Big Book of Negro Spirituals" (Judson Press, 2003) analyzes the historical context, origins, and themes of the spirituals. Theology professor Father Bruno Chenu explores how the spirituals view God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, human freedom, salvation, and heaven. Out of an estimated 6,000 known spirituals, the book contains the full text of 200 songs, along with a CD of eighteen spirituals.

Although the songs contain universal meaning, pondering their original context is extremely meaningful for someone like me. I never stopped to consider "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was not written by some Vatican Two composer but rather by someone held in bondage, who must have had immense trust in God. Nor did I realize that "Go Down, Moses" was not merely a retelling of the story of Moses, but rather a promise that the God who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt would also deliver the American slaves one day as well (a meaning not lost on some plantation owners who banned the song).

On the subject of the suffering and death of Christ, spirituals don't merely intellectualize or theologize about the event. As Father Chenu notes, "The slaves did not tire of contemplating the crucified one. Why? Because the life of Jesus strangely resembled their own lives. The slaves began to identify with Jesus."

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" asks the spiritual. "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?" The agony of Jesus is up close, personal. Jesus is the one who understands the anguish, humiliation, torture, and injustice of an innocent person hanging from a tree, not by reading a book, but by personal experience.

The spirituals also reveal a people who did not allow their pain and sorrow to drown out that gem of virtue, hope. They believed that the suffering, death, and rising of Christ would lead them to true freedom. The Holy Spirit keeps this hope alive. In "There Is a Balm in Gilead," we hear:

Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

The power of Christ's resurrection is a sign that love always triumphs over evil. Slaves often experienced the death of loved ones, and the pain of separation that came from family members being sold to other plantations. In the spirituals, "home" is often code talk for heaven, the place where suffering will be abolished, and all beloved people will be reunited:

Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home...
I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see, comin' for to carry me home?
A band of angels comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home. . . .
If you get there before I do, comin' for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too, comin' for to carry me home.

I've still got a lot to learn about spirituals. But I'm glad to have seen these sacred songs in a new light. I'm reminded that singing is a wonderful way to pray, to meditate on the mysteries of our faith, and to nurture hope. I give thanks for the composers of the spirituals, whose names are unknown to us but nevertheless written in heaven. May we be forever grateful for their giftedness, insights, and witness to truth and the triumph of love.

