



MESSAGE FROM THE MOST HON. PORTIA SIMPSON MILLER, PRIME MINISTER FOR EMANCIPATION DAY - AUGUST 1, 2014

I greet you, my fellow Jamaicans, on this “August Morning” as we observe the 176th anniversary of our emancipation from enslavement.

It is also the year in which we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League by our icons, the Rt Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey and Amy Ashwood Garvey.

While we in Jamaica are celebrating Emancipation, our Diaspora family is also giving thanks for this day, and I salute you for sharing this historic moment with those of us on the rock.

I imagine our ancestors in 1834 and again in 1838, staying up all night, as some of you did symbolically at islandwide vigils on July 31, so that they could witness, the dawning of freedom; freedom promised for so many years; freedom hoped for and fought for.

I ask you to take a moment to recall the sacrifices that led us to this day.

On May 23, 1832, at the young age of 31, the Rt Excellent Sam Sharpe, hero of our emancipation, was hanged in the Montego Bay Town Square by order of the colonial government in Jamaica. Rev. Bleby recorded Sharpe’s attitude toward freedom, when he said:

“Sharpe . . . was not, however, to be convinced that he had done wrong in endeavouring to assert his claim to freedom.”

Sam Sharpe, like so many of our forefathers and mothers, had endured brutality and genocide that took place at shocking levels. We recall too the dreadful experiences of Mary Prince of Bermuda, who recorded memories of the atrocities she endured and the horrors endured by the enslaved and pregnant Rosie at the hands of her captors.

I think of the over 130 Africans mostly from Ghana on the ship Zong, who were deliberately drowned and recall the fate of Carpatha and Tula in Curaçao in a terrible act of intimidation and humiliation in 1795.

I think of the over 700 Africans locked in to drown in the Maroni River estuary in Suriname in 1738 while the crew made their escape and the horrible conditions on board Liverpool ships transporting Africans to Jamaica.

I think of the -5 million captured Africans sold in Jamaica over 2 centuries, only 20% of whom survived and of the 5.5 million persons imported to the British Caribbean, only about 800,000 were left at the time of Emancipation.

When I think of these things, I can only imagine the delight of our forebears, who on 1st August 1838, could say, like Martin Luther King Jr's Civil Right' speech: "Free at Last, Free at Last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

The British preacher Ralph Wardlaw, capturing what the slaves must have felt on the approach of Emancipation said:

"Oh, what heart is there so cold, so seared, so dead as to feel no thrill of exulting emotion at the thought that on the morning of this day, eight hundred thousand fellow-men and who during the past night slept bondmen, awoke freemen!"

In Jamaica on that first "full free" August morning, peaceful celebrations occurred across the island. A hearse containing shackles and chains that had been used to bind rebellious slaves, was driven through the streets of the capital Spanish Town, and was ceremoniously burned.

Some of our ancestors went to Church to give thanks; others gathered in community celebrations; still others, especially women, stayed home because for the first time in their lives, they could!

For the first time at last on that August morning, there was no conch shell being blown at the crack of dawn, to which they had no choice but to respond.

For the first time at last on that August morning, they did not have to hustle out to the fields and other work places.

For the first time at last on that August morning, there was no-one to police their weaning, and no one to tell them when or whether they could eat or drink.

In light of these historical truths, I ask: How will you spend this day in a manner that will bring honour to your ancestors, those freed on 1st August 1834 and on August 1st, 1838? How will you honour the local and regional activists who could not enter the British Parliament to press their claim for freedom?

I ask you on this Emancipation Day, to visit a monument in your area. Every monument to our ancestors, new and old, is important in celebrating the memory of those who bled and died, struggled and sacrificed so that we can be free.

I ask you on this day to remember not only the ancestors whose names we know well, but the lesser known ones like John Clarke and Edward Jarrett, leaders of the Argyle war in Hanover in 1824; Abraham Peart of Spice Grove in Manchester; Solomon Atkinson of Fairy Hill in Portland.

I ask you to remember Sarah Darling of Mitcham in St. Elizabeth; John Barclay of Spring Valley in St Thomas in the East and Charles Duncan of Charlton in St. Thomas in the Vale; all of whom were punished for fighting for freedom in 1831/32.

Other names from other parishes are in the records of the National Library of Jamaica. Seek them out and pay homage to them.

It was historian, Professor Hilary Beckles who said of our post-emancipation struggle:

“Our citizens have faced this past head on, and have established a vibrant culture of community self-help and sustainable regional development mobilization”.

This is why we need to remember not just the brutality, savagery and wickedness of slavery, but also the tenacity of purpose, the resistance, the resilience and the indomitable will of the enslaved.

My fellow Jamaicans, it is a remarkable and startling thing to imagine that there were actually persons of our bloodline who were not seen as persons; who were categorized as brute beasts without human dignity; and yet who in the face of such dehumanization clung stubbornly to the notion that freedom was their right.

If our ancestors could nurture that ‘all-things-are-possible’ attitude under such heart-rending conditions, then what could there be that we - their heirs, cannot do today?

What circumstances can exist today; what challenges can we face that could ever overwhelm us or cause us to lose hope?

They struggled valiantly against oppression when it seemed there was no hope. Everything was stacked against them and it seemed utterly futile to grasp for anything better; but they did, against all odds and so can we!

Our ability to overcome against all odds, our determination and our ‘never-say-die’ attitude is what defines us as a people. It is who we are, irrespective of our lineage – Out of Many, One People - resilient, capable, determined and strong!

Poet Vera Bell’s words ring true on this Emancipation Day:

*“Ancestor on the Auction block
Across the years your eyes seek mine
Compelling me to look...*

*...I see you sweating, toiling, suffering,
Within your loins I see the seed
Of multitudes.*

*From your Labour
Grow roads, aqueducts, cultivation
A new country is born
Yours was the task to clear the ground
Mine be the task to build.”*

My Fellow Jamaicans: Build we can... build we must...and build we shall, for this is Jamaica, our Jamaica, Land we love. (END)