

Slavery

Tomorrow the Church of England commemorates three men who worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery: William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson. William Wilberforce is the best known of the three. He was born in Hull in 1759 and served as a Member of Parliament between 1780 and 1825. In 1785 he became an Evangelical Christian within the Church of England and that turning point led to major changes in his lifestyle and to a lifelong concern for reform. Two years later he met Thomas Clarkson and other activists who persuaded him to take on the cause of the abolition of slavery. Olaudah Equiano was a freed slave who settled in England and assisted the abolitionists. After much effort the campaign was successful. In 1807 the trade in slaves was made illegal in the British Empire, and Wilberforce lived to see the complete abolition of slavery just before his death on the 30th of July 1833.

We take it for granted that the whole idea of slavery is repugnant and totally against any understanding of humanity and the way in which we should treat one another. And yet the campaign for its abolition did not have an easy passage. There were of course many vested interests. Much money had been made by the slave trade – both directly by slave owners and indirectly by many British cities that benefitted economically from the practice. Many Christians accepted it as the norm. In the ancient world even St Paul did not condemn the institution of slavery as such. But if anything slavery in the eighteenth century was something far more cruel and demeaning than ever before.

Despite its official abolition the effects of the slave trade are still with us today. Continuing racial tensions in the United States are evidence of that, with the belief in some quarters that the Biblical assertion of the equality of all people in God's eyes does not somehow apply to black people. There is still much work to do in achieving real equality and inclusiveness.

And there are other forms of slavery still prevalent in our world today: in domestic service where servants are virtually imprisoned by their employers, in the terrible practice of sex trafficking, in the experience of illegal migrants who are exploited with little or no pay. In these situations basic human rights are blatantly ignored.

All this naturally leads to pain and suffering, to resentment and despair. Above all this is contrary to the Christian Gospel, the exact opposite of the values of the Kingdom of God taught by Jesus. The Bible passage from St Luke's Gospel that we heard just now is appointed to be read on the feast day of these three abolitionists. Our Lord's message echoes that of the prophet Isaiah before him and announces freedom, liberation. With Jesus that liberation becomes a reality. May those who fight against slavery in our modern world be given the courage and the tenacity that people like William Wilberforce displayed.

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