

Wilberforce Lecture

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Bishop James Jones

In spite of or maybe because so much attention has been given to the Bicentennial Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade I sense that many in our society are still wondering what all the fuss is about.

Much of my own ministry has been in Bristol, Hull and Liverpool and my own Diocese is united with Virginia in America and Akure in Nigeria in a partnership which replicates the Slave Trade Triangle. The people and places have opened up my imagination to the realities of racism so inextricably chained to trade in black slaves. Slavery in one form or another has always been and remains even to this day a feature of human society. The I.L.O. estimates that 179 million people are caught up in forced labour, that 218 million children between 5 and 17 are engaged in some form of slave labour and 2.4 million are victims of sexual trafficking. What was distinctive about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery was its overt racism. The millions of slaves were African and black.

Recently I was part of a consultation on the environment in America. It took place on an old Cotton Plantation in South Georgia. We were addressed by a black Pastor from Atlanta who had been with Martin Luther King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when he had given his celebrated "I have a dream" speech. The pastor said only half jokingly that he'd felt nervous coming to the plantation especially when he'd seen the Old Oak Tree. The mainly white gathering froze in guilty embarrassment. The hanging of black people because of the colour of their

skin was for him and his audience within their living memory. The roots of racism cannot be disentangled from the history of slavery. Racism is the legacy of the transatlantic trade.

Those who wonder what all the fuss is about fail to see this connection and underestimate the destructive power of racism in the modern world. In Liverpool we came face to face with its ugly manifestation when the young, talented and black Anthony Walker was murdered with an axe in a hideously brutal racist attack. The taunting and bullying of a person because of the colour of his skin has its antecedents in the dehumanising treatment of black people who were traded in their millions from Africa to America in the vilest of barbaric conditions and in ships that sailed out of London, Bristol and Liverpool. I can barely bear to tell you this but one such slave ship was actually and cruelly named "The Blessing". Estimates vary but at least ten million slaves were transported and at least one million died in transit. Did I say "died"? I should have said killed because the mode in which they were traded was grotesque and deliberate. The remarkable autobiography of Olaudah Equiano called (and this must be a classic example of English understatement) "An interesting narrative" catalogues the brutality of the life at sea and testifies to the tragic lot of the slave in transit.

"The stench of the holdbecame absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of chains the filth of the necessary tubs [latrine buckets], into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable".

For those who survived the conditions on arrival were equally harsh. On a visit to Virginia I was taken by a young black priest to stand on the banks of the James River where half a million slaves were traded in Richmond. She showed me Lumpkins Jail where they were corralled before being sold and the gallows where they were hanged if they rebelled. I wept for the shame of it. I think I wept also out of a sense of mystery for here I was in the presence of a young black woman who had embraced the faith of the very people who had been her ancestors oppressors. I was standing on the same soil as grace. It brought into sharp focus the relationship between Christianity and the trade in slaves.

The fact that William Wilberforce became a committed Christian and championed the passing through Parliament of the Bill to abolish the Slave Trade could be, and indeed has been, taken by Christians to be both evidence and example of how Christianity inspires radical social action and transformation. Although that is an attractive thesis and has within it seeds of truth, the fuller picture is much more complicated.

As Christopher Leslie Brown in his book "Moral Capital" has shown the relationship between Christianity and slavery and its trade was sadly more ambivalent than that. The Establishment countenanced both slavery and the trade fearing that abolition would threaten the British Empire with economic ruin. The Bishops, with the notable exception of the Bishop of Chester, Reilly Porteus, who later went on to become "Bishop of London" sided with the Establishment. Adam Hochschild in his book "Bury the Chains" tells of a plantation in the West Indies which was owned by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, whose governing board included the Regius Professors of Divinity at Oxford and Cambridge and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The estate's brand, burned onto the chests of slaves with a red-hot iron, was SOCIETY. The clerics on the society's board noticed the plantation's high death rate, but made no move to change how it operated. "I have long wondered & lamented," wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury to a fellow bishop in 1760, "that the Negroes in our

plantations decrease, & new supplies become necessary continually. Surely this proceeds from Defect, both of Humanity, & even of good policy. But we must take things as they are at present.”

So much for the prophetic moral vision of the Church of England!

And even the evangelicals who eventually emerged as a driving force of the abolition movement were possessed of a personal piety which sought principally the conversion of others so that slave owning converts in the Colonies would lead more upright lives and their converted slaves would become more industrious!

Brown and other historians show that there were many factors at work in the complex history of the abolition movement. This brief lecture does not offer space to debate these so I simply note some of the forces at work in the world that contributed to the context: the American War of Independence, the War with France, the changing shape of the British Empire, the philosophy of liberty emerging in Britain, the Quaker Movement, the Evangelical Revival and in the colonies the growing and courageous resistance of the slaves themselves. All these played a part in the changing social context but, as always happens, there appeared on the stage of this new world significant players whose lives and actions would not only increase the drama but seemingly change the course of history. Thomas Clarkson, Hannah More, James Ramsey, James Phillips, Margaret Middleton, Olaudah Equiano, John Newton, William Wilberforce to name but some. Each merits a biography, let alone a lecture!

John Newton exercised great influence over Wilberforce. Newton had commanded a slave ship and led a troubled and dissolute life. Shipwrecked and in fear of death he converted to Christ. In spite of his spiritual awakening he continued to command a slave ship which again poses questions about the relationship between slavery and Christianity. Indeed his testimony of his evangelical conversion is full of repentance yet not about how he treated black

slaves but rather about blaspheming. When he fell ill he became Surveyor of the Tides in Liverpool before then becoming a priest and prolific writer of hymns including “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me”. He acted as a mentor to Wilberforce whom he met first as a boy of 12 and was the only slave ship Captain to give evidence of the “heinous evil” to the Parliamentary Commission on the Slave Trade. But it took Newton some thirty years from his conversion to speak out publicly against it as he himself acknowledged. “During the time I was engaged in the slave-trade, I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness, I was upon the whole satisfied with it, as the appointment Providence had marked out for me It is indeed accounted a genteel employment, and is usually very profitable.”

Yet it was through the likes of Newton that Wilberforce sensed that following his own evangelical conversion his future lay in applying Christian principles to public policy. As Brown and others have shown this was not familiar territory for evangelicals whose puritan emphasis was on personal salvation and individual piety. What was it that propelled the evangelicals out of their subculture and into the public arena so that for at least half a century they became the driving force of social reform in nineteenth century Britain? It’s a lesson evangelicals seem to have to learn afresh in every generation because the evangelical tradition often pulls in a very other-worldly direction.

John Coffe of the Jubilee Centre offers a detailed analysis but at the risk of oversimplifying I want to identify three key features about the evangelical contribution to the abolition movement and the social reform agenda.

Firstly, William Wilberforce personified in himself the connection between public affairs and private faith. Here was a figure who was immersed in public life not least through his membership of Parliament and his friendship with William Pitt the Prime Minister and who was also immersed in evangelical spirituality through his conversion and fellowship with the Teston group and the Clapham Sect.

Here was a man baptised in both public affairs and private faith, in personal salvation and social action. And others would later follow, most notably Lord Shaftsbury.

Secondly, evangelical Christianity takes you back to the text of the Gospel and has the potential to subvert what is known as “nominal Christianity”. Wilberforce himself wrote such a book entitled “A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity” (how’s that for a snappy title?)

Evangelicalism differentiates itself from formal religion by emphasising the need for a personal response to Christ and demonstrable change. It was distinctive, and it found in the abolition movement an opportunity to express its spiritual and moral distinctiveness. And in Wilberforce it had found a leader and provided him with a following.

Thirdly, the changing social and political context provided a new forum in which to debate and to explore the meaning of the ancient text of Scripture. The Bible is a dynamic book. In different times and cultures its themes and principles will variously come to the fore just as in this period Christians are discovering in the Bible hitherto unemphasised texts about the earth and our environment. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Christians and especially evangelicals who attach to scripture a primary authority were discovering serious and vital principles about the brotherhood of humanity, deliverance and liberty, loving your neighbour, guilt and judgement, repentance and atonement and jubilee.

All this was informed by and informed the general debate about slavery and the trade, culminating in the Abolition Act of 1807 which came about through an alliance of people both black and white who not only responded to events with spiritual wisdom but also challenged the prevailing view with moral courage.

On a personal note I am honoured to give this brief contribution to the Wilberforce Lecture in this Bicentennial Year. Ever since I was a student I have been inspired by William Wilberforce and the example he gave of applying to public policy the values of the Kingdom of God. He took forward the conversation between the world and the Word, and in concert with others helped change the moral landscape of the empire through the abolition of the Slave Trade and eventually slavery itself. They brought closer a vision of the human family which Christ himself saw and acted upon.

I would like to end with an episode from the life of Christ which challenges the racism that is the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Cleansing of the Temple.

It is true that most commentators have interpreted this as a statement by Christ against commercialism. But such an interpretation falls short of its full meaning and obscures a crucial element in the story. The significance of what Jesus does is found in his quotations from the Old Testament and in realising where in the Temple the action took place. The stalls were set up in the Court of the Gentiles, the place where the other races could draw near to the God of Abraham and Moses. By filling the court with market stalls the authorities were denying the other races their sacred space. Jesus overturned the tables quoting from Isaiah and Jeremiah and insisted that the Temple should be “A House of Prayer for all races”. Over the years we have neglected this emphasis, preferring instead to concentrate on the “Den of Thieves”! We have failed to see the true nature of the robbery. What was stolen was the vision of every single race being able to worship God together in His House of Prayer. The cleansing of the Temple was as much an action against racism as it was against unbridled commercialism. In Isaiah, from which Jesus quotes, the prophet holds before us a vision of God’s Kingdom where people of every race within the human family come together joyfully to worship God in all his glory. It’s a vision to die for. Many have. And Jesus did. It’s a vision, a dream that has yet to come true.

If, as I believe, racism is the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade then even 200 years on we are heirs of this evil. We need moral and political leadership that not only names the prejudice but also acts in a just and merciful way to embrace every ethnic group in contemporary Britain where the Christian faith has shaped the Law, Liberty, Language and the Landscape of our nation. In this respect we need a new generation of men and women like Olaudah Equiano and William Wilberforce.

The Rt. Rev. James Jones

Bishop of Liverpool

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