

SET ALL FREE

*Three addresses given at the service held at Durham Cathedral
to mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act*

March 24th 2007

North East Christian Churches Together

1. REMEMBERING

Linda Ali, Set all free executive member and Vice Chair USPG

“Lord Jesus let your light shine in our hearts, and illuminate our minds,
as we strive to love our neighbour as you love us.”

I read a letter about the bicentenary commemorations, in a daily newspaper last Monday, it said: “If we are prepared to remember the nation’s achievements like the Battle at Waterloo, The Industrial Revolution and other past glories, then we must be prepared to remember the not so glorious deeds and be ready to share in the nation’s Guilt, and thus apologise.”

To remember is to engage with that wonderful gift from our creator, the gift of memory.

So when we remember events such as Armistice Day in November, we pay homage to and respect those who gave their lives to make this country safe.

We also recall, in 1943, 233,000 African Soldiers risked their lives to free France from German occupation – a country and people they had never seen.

We are our Brother’s keeper. And while we have no control over the past actions of our forefathers during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, we have every control over how we respond to those actions today.

Therefore to ignore the contributions of millions of Africans who gave their lives towards the economic prosperity of modern Britain, is to disrespect them – to say they do not matter. Up to now, that is precisely what we have done. As far as the British involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade is concerned, we seem to have suffered from collective amnesia.

In Isaiah we read “ Look you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers..”

But, today God has given us this opportunity to make oppression history and, to tell the truth about a most unsavoury aspect of our history- to try and come to terms with it – it is difficult but Christ reassures us that He is with us in our most difficult moments – moments such as today as we remember those on both sides of this painful story.

(1) We remember the **enslaved people of Africa**, men women and children, not simply items on a schedule of plantation property. We also remember the anguish of the **descendants of the enslaved** and their continuing struggle against discrimination.

(2) We remember the **owners of slaves and their descendants** – many of whom continue to suffer the trauma of guilt and denial.

We as Christians must be prepared to take that first step in this solemn process of remembering because the church was part of upholding the slave trade through its interests in the West Indies in the form of two sugar plantations in Barbados worked by 300 enslaved Africans, a generous gift from Christopher Codrington the Governor General of the Leeward Island.

This magnificent cathedral was also associated with the slave trade. Firstly through one of the most dedicated abolitionists, Granville Sharp. Grandson of a former Archbishop of York. Sharp was a distinguished lawyer who used his skills to free many slaves who arrived in England. And secondly, through one of its Bishops, Thomas Thurlow, who helped to manage the Barbados plantations along with other members of the church hierarchy. In parliament, some Bishops supported the pro-slavery lobby. We learn that in 1791 when the Bill failed in Parliament, the Bishops asked for church bells to be rung throughout the country!

Like the gassing of Jews during the Second World War, the Transatlantic slave trade can only be described as downright evil. It was undignified, brutal and traumatic

Undignified because men women girls and boys were made to walk miles to work naked, in chains.

Brutal because of severe daily whippings and, branding that removed an African's identity - these were common practices.

Traumatic because African people were ripped away from their families, they saw their country-folk killed during transportation and on plantations.

Even babies were not excused from the horror. A story from the slaves' narratives recall (To Be A Slave by Julius Lester): "A group of women were forced to take their babies to the fields, the babies were placed them in an animal trough, while the mothers were in the distant field the rains came down in great sheets. The trough filled up with water and every baby was floating around in it, drowned!"

Unless we remember, and face up to this painful aspect of our past and seek forgiveness how can we occupy the moral high ground – how can we point our moralistic finger at those involved in human trafficking and all forms of slavery today.

As Holy Week approaches we are reminded of the enormous price that was paid for our freedom. Can it be so difficult for us to feel the sorrow and remorse for man's inhumanity to men women and children during the Transatlantic Slave Trade?

To remember these painful events of history can only serve to help us navigate our future.

The light came into the world to heal, to show us how to walk together; Jesus Son of the world by your cross and your life laid down, you set your people free. Amen.

2. REFLECTING

The Rt Revd John Pritchard, Bishop of Jarrow

SLAVERY: ONLY CONNECT

In Holy Trinity church on Clapham Common you can see an old and well-worn table. It's the table on which William Wilberforce wrote the draft of the Act to abolish the slave trade in that remarkable period of social reform inspired by a group of Christian lay people in the early nineteenth century. And that's the same table on which Holy Communion is celebrated every Sunday to this day. What a brilliant symbol of the holistic nature of Christian mission.

The table of communion and the table of politics. The same table. As EM Forster wrote 'Only connect... Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted.'

Let's just follow both sides of that connection and see where they lead. Take the writing table first. That connects to a famous meeting when Wm Wilberforce met his old friend Wm Pitt, then Prime Minister, under an old oak tree near Croydon. Pitt persuaded Wilberforce of the urgency of the need to abolish the slave trade, and how that was an imperative of his Christian faith. Wilberforce, still a young MP, had found his cause.

So that meeting was connected to Wilberforce's Christian faith, a faith which would energise and uphold him all through the decades of struggle until the final abolition of slavery itself, not just the slave trade, in 1833.

And that faith in turn is connected to the Jesus of the gospels whose Freedom Manifesto we've just heard in the reading from Luke ch. 4. This is what the young Member for Galilee South would have posted through the letter boxes in his election campaign (if he'd had one). This is what he stood for. This is what he'd come for. 'To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free [listen to that], and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Only connect – and that writing table in the church on Clapham Common is connected to the social manifesto of Jesus himself.

Now, what if we follow the other use of that old table, its use as a table for Holy Communion? What are the connections we can trace over there? First, of course, it connects to the table at which Jesus and the disciples sat for the Last Supper. It was the table at which Jesus opened his heart to his friends, and told them all he could about what was really going on. It's where he saw one of his best friends go out into the night to betray him, and then, in the gathering darkness, summed up the whole meaning of his life and death in the breaking and sharing of bread and wine. That's the powerful connection we make every Sunday when we 'do this in remembrance of him.'

But then that event connects vividly with the Passover of a thousand years before when the Lord 'passed over' the land of Egypt and in the ensuing mayhem set his people free from slavery. They set off that night, 'free at last' as the black preachers would say so many years later.

And what does that Passover connect with? Well, Jesus' Freedom Manifesto of course. 'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free [of course], and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And so the connections come full circle. What is united in that table in that special church on Clapham Common, leads in both directions to the Freedom Manifesto of Jesus in Nazareth. Only connect.

There's been a huge response to this bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade. TV programmes, radio programmes, magazine articles, discussions, commemorations, services, walks of witness and so on. Each of us probably has our own particular 'take' on the event. One vivid way it's been brought home to me is through seeing Turner's painting entitled 'Slave Ship.' In typical vivid colours the painting tells the searing story of when 132 men, women and children, their hands in fetters, were thrown into shark-infested seas so that the traders could claim the insurance money for their loss. And we protest 'How could they?!

But only connect. In Wilberforce's day there were an estimated 4 million slaves. Today there are an estimated 12 million. 'How could they?' Or rather - 'How could we?' As Herschel said 'Some are guilty; all are responsible.' Whether it's sex trafficking – organised crime's fastest growing business – or drug trafficking, or the slavery caused by debt or by systematic economic injustice – whatever it's form, slavery is alive and well and living before our eyes.

Isn't that the most important connection to make? There's a straight line between the events of 1807 and 2007. William Pitt might want to meet us too, under an old oak tree, and ask us to connect what's happening all over the world to our Christian faith and the Freedom Manifesto of Jesus.

If you go to the old oak tree now you'll find it's died; just a stump remains. The site is overgrown and surrounded by barbed wire. But there's a new sapling there, the contemporary manifestation of the old tree. May today's church be a new sapling, determined never to separate the table of Communion, the table of the Lord, from the table of politics and social change.

Only – always - connect.

3. RESPONDING

Bishop Joe Aldred, Chair of the Council of Black Led Churches

How ought we to respond to the legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade? I've been involved in several discussions dealing with this question of responding to the contemporary legacies of the Slave Trade. This includes my own writings in newspapers and periodicals, participating in discussions on radio, and importantly discussions among African Caribbean communities. This latter includes a discussion on BBC Radio West Midlands last night in Birmingham. It was a most poignant, difficult and at times angry discussion. The anger of many in the African Caribbean community is rooted in the unease of how easily the poacher can turn game-keeper. So that from John Hawkins the villain, to William Wilberforce the saint, one thing is consistent: black invisibility; even twelve million blacks. In this very problematic bicentenary commemoration year, especially white people need to make every effort to avoid the scenario of heads I win, tails you lose.

The set all free abolition project of CTE offers us two broad headings under which we might consider our response. First, 'by working to effect healing and reconciliation'. How might we do this? Let me suggest that we might do well to focus on that old Christian word, 'atonement'. This means 'to cover', 'to appease', 'to placate' or 'to cancel'. Atonement is brought about by sacrifice as exemplified by Jesus' death for human sin, but it brings about peace and closure. So what might be a suitable act or series of acts of atonement responses to this history of psychological, spiritual, economic, social and political degradation we call the Slave Trade?

First of all, let's use an appropriate phrase to describe what we are talking about. The Atlantic Ocean did not enslave anybody, so I suggest renaming this shameful trade the 'European Slave Trade in Africans'. Then, our Prime Minister might move from equivocally expressing 'deep sorrow' for Britain's involvement in the Trade, to unequivocally saying 'sorry'. Western Europe's leaders might recognise the devastation caused by the Slave Trade, slavery and colonialism by seriously and respectfully engaging with African and Caribbean leaders about a way forward in true partnership. How about, erecting a monument in central London as a reminder to present and future generations never again to enslave our fellow humans and thereby deface the image of God in man. When abolition was agreed, the planters were compensated to the tune of £20 million. The enslaved Africans got nothing. So, how about establishing this bicentenary year an 'atonement fund' of £20 million to begin with, for the benefit of the descendents of the survivors of the trade, to offer bursaries to study at higher degree levels, and as business seed funding. Then how about a public holiday for everybody, we could colonise an existing Bank Holiday and call it 'Freedom Day' symbolizing our vision of a world in which all are free. Then let's all take up Set all Free's challenge to take action to end all modern forms of slavery. And let the church take the lead in rooting out racism from our midst as an example to the wider society.

I feel the need to warn us that if we are what the book of James warns against, 'hearers and not doers', if we mouth remorse but do not repent and make restitution, if we talk the talk but do not walk the walk, there will continue for years to come to be an angry, disenfranchised part of our community whose presence will be a constant reminder of our failure to truly respond to the enduring legacies of the European Slave Trade in Africans.