

Anti-Slavery Sunday

Organist, Sarah and I, share a love for a beautiful city, where when I was at University, the music department was right next door to the Theology department, in Royal Fort House – and the city is Bristol. I mention this because years later but still very much, in **all** our collective memories, you will remember the Edward Colston statue being toppled and dumped into the city harbour. It was declared to be ‘A violent act’ by a subsequent court, as that same court was reminded that Colston played an active role in the enslavement of 84,000 black people with around 19,000 dying on slave ships.

That protest continues to send ripples around, asking all of us how best to record history, especially ‘bad history’, if I may call it that. A lot of heart searching still goes on about commemorative windows, statues and the difficult stories they tell but personally I do not think we can eradicate the past simply by replacing all the bad bits, or bad people. What, I believe, we have to do is to say what happened even if it was violent, cruel and utterly selfish – and somehow learn from it and through it.

Here in Woodbridge we have our ‘own hero’ in that 19th century abolitionist, John Clarkson, who is buried here – someone whom I suspect would still be protesting today where there is human trafficking. Sadly we still hear of families and children drowning in boats too small and crowded to possibly survive the perilous crossings they are making. And also very much on our minds and in our prayers

today are the rights of innocent children and families being forced to leave their homes in northern Gaza, while being indiscriminately bombed at night – victims, I believe, of an act of heartless revenge, a blatant ‘war crime’ which history too, will and must, properly record.

There is a place for protest even though it seems we are unable to abolish either slavery or war.

Asked by a national newspaper to name the most influential British citizen of the last millennium, the former Archbishop of Canterbury didn’t have much hesitation in saying, William Wilberforce. His legacy affected the lives of so many millions yet whose struggle against inhumanity enjoyed so little in the way of financial or military support. So much rested on the personal motivation of one man, encouraged by a small and dedicated group.

In our own day, and inspired by Church of England ‘backing’ and support, the Clewer Initiative is very much carrying on the ‘teaching role’ to draw our attention to the varied and often unseen victims of modern slavery up and down our county and country – in car washes or nail bars or massage parlours – where ‘safeguarding’ is a dirty word because profit and gain and abuse still have the upper hand, and many victims suffer in silence. Please do take a look at our small display boards which not only provide us with emergency numbers if we suspect someone is in danger, but also raise ideas how we as a Church community (Churches Together, I would suggest) could be more proactive in our practical help.

Woodbridge is not, for whatever reason, anywhere near as diverse a place as Bristol – there are few black or Asian or Palestinian families; I am not aware of any mosques or synagogues, or temples either. It is so important to learn, as well as teach: the importance of diversity and complete respect and dignity for those of different faiths or none. It is so important to recognize ‘the story of slavery’ as something happening now as well as in the past. Rowan Williams said of Wilberforce (or it could equally be John or Thomas Clarkson)...they confront us now with the question, ‘If Christians, committed to personal responsibility and social justice, cannot keep before the eyes of the state and its legislators issues that are greater than security and profit, who can?’

That is a positive question to ask and answer. It is very easy indeed to beat ourselves up about past failures or wrongs, but much harder to build a safer, more just Society, Church, City, or Town. I do believe it is entirely fitting to process out at the end to remember someone who really did that ‘re-building’ to the best of his ability, at great personal cost and sacrifice. His courage and influence abides amidst all the suffering and sadness Christ longs us to heal and change.

John Clarkson’s faith, courage and example abide in Woodbridge for us to use and share: as much with the stranger, as our own peer groups, family or friends.