



18th February 2007
Gospel Mass to mark the Bicentenary of the
Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807

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The Dean – The Rev'd Duncan Dormor

*From the cowardice that dare not name the truth
From the laziness that is content with half-truth
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth
Good Lord, Deliver us. Amen*

One of the features of working with students in this very privileged environment is the 'essay crisis' with its constituent elements: the procrastination, the looming deadline, the late night – or even all-nighter. But, of course, the essay comes, the crisis goes, and the world doesn't change... usually.

Back in 1785, however, one student was having an 'essay crisis' of a totally different magnitude altogether. Not untypical of Cambridge students down the years, he was, in addition to being hardworking, scholarly and intelligent, an ambitious young man. He had already won one University Essay prize and he set his mind to win that for senior students in the University, a major triumph it would undoubtedly bring him to the attention of others and assist him considerably in his chosen career - as a Clergyman in the Established Church. Despite being, as he later admitted 'entirely ignorant' of the subject, he set about the task with characteristic determination anticipating the pure intellectual pleasure he would derive 'from the invention of the arguments' and their arrangement.

He could not have been more wrong: The more he researched the question, the more it haunted him, even possessed him. It was, as he recalled '*...but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the day-time I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eye-lids for grief*'¹

The sleepless student in question was Thomas Clarkson: The essay: 'Can men lawfully be made slaves against their will?' was not to alter, not just his life, but the course of history. For - after twenty years; 35, 000 miles on horseback; a failed attempt on his life; a complete breakdown in his health; and near-financial ruin - his single-minded devotion bore fruit with the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, for which he, his friend William Wilberforce and a small group dedicated individuals were pretty directly responsible...

But first we must remember that as a British citizen there was every reason to sleep uneasily:

Great Britain has the dubious privilege of having been the leading nation in the slave trade for nearly two hundred years. During that time it is estimated that between 9 and 12 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic² – a significant proportion died *en route*, from disease, from abusive treatment or in Equiano's words because they preferred 'death to *to such a life of misery*'. On arrival in the Caribbean the vast majority were condemned to work in the Sugar plantations where life expectancy was extremely limited; sadism and sexual abuse on the part of slave owners was rife and the mere whisper of revolt led to gruesome acts of torture and execution:

¹ Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of Abolition of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament* vol I (London 1808).

² See <http://www.setallfree.net/index.html>.

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But such dehumanising brutality was also 'good business': Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean were locked into a system of social and economic interdependence, which quite literally weighed human souls in the balance against guns, copper and cloth from Britain and sugar and rum from the Caribbean. Much of this country's economic development in the Eighteenth Century was built on the backs and the broken bodies of the slaves, it was, if you will, the slaves who economically-speaking put the 'Great' into Great Britain: Thousands of individuals, financiers, businessmen, tradesmen were implicated in the flow of such blood money; all the institutions of the Establishment were complicit, as indeed were many Senior Churchmen some of whom provided theological support for the institution of slavery. As it has often been pointed out empires tend to cloak their enterprises in piety for 'Evil never feels safe unless it wears the mask of divinity'³

History is not riddled with examples of profitable monopolies which are voluntarily relinquished, yet in a relatively short period of time, a small handful of men and women in the face of ridicule and threat launched the first successful mass human rights movement. In many ways they were a fairly unlikely group: Clarkson was obsessional, tactless, brusque and a man of radical beliefs; Wilberforce, by contrast was a conservative, a man of great wealth who also possessed immense charm and enjoyed extensive connections in the higher echelons of society. John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace* was a former slave ship captain; Equiano had been a slave before becoming a famous author, public figure and witness to Black accomplishment in a world in which racist assumptions were prevalent; some were Quakers, and as such viewed with suspicion, others Evangelical or liberal Anglicans.

The shared goal of abolition was pursued not just through pamphlets and books documenting the case, but also through the more imaginative and creative expression of the arts – either to satirise the supporters of slavery or to reach out and evoke people's sympathy, to win the argument through a direct appeal to the sense of what it meant to be a human being. Songs, poetry, ceramics – even opera was used and there was an extensive flow between the exercise of the human imagination and experience. From the outset, Thomas Clarkson asked his reader to try to identify with the enslaved African, and in his moving autobiography, Equiano quotes from a poem 'Dying Negro' by the white poet, Thomas Day's to capture and express, his, that is Equiano's own experience of slavery⁴; whilst Black poets like Francis Williams, show a mastery of contemporary C18th English style. Perhaps the most obvious fruit of some coming together is, of course, *Amazing Grace*, written by the former slaver, John Newton yet appropriated and transformed through the Black gospel tradition. Today's musical collaboration is an echo of such mutual influence and coming together.

What united the abolitionists and the slaves, united black and white was a powerful and uncompromising moral vision of how things could be, a vision informed by the prophetic heart of the scriptures with its passionate thirst for justice and its uncompromising vision of equality. An expression of hope in the 'Spirit of the Lord', in the possibility of a re-imagined and reformed society in which all could enjoy true freedom, as brothers and sisters. Such a hope found expression in the memories and psalms of the Israelites; in the zeal of the campaigners, and to the distress of many slave-owners such a defiant hope took hold also in the lives and identity of African slaves and was expressed powerfully through songs and spirituals.

The achievement we recognise today was a profound and crucial one, yet we must also remember that decades of disappointment followed, for slaves and reformers had to wait until 1833 for emancipation within the British Empire and on quite unfavourable terms and that slavery did not end elsewhere until much later:

³ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, 1986 p 140

⁴ Chapter 6 of *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudab Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*. Extracts of the book may be found here: <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/>

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Remember also that the legacies of discrimination, racism and institutional brutality have persisted and persist into our own generation; That the dreams of Martin Luther King of little black boys girls holding hands with little white boys and girls or the vision of a Desmond Tutu for a `rainbow people of God' have yet to be fully realised. Remember that closer to home the reception of many from the Caribbean arriving in this country in the 1950s and 1960s was far from warm and welcoming; remember in short that the Slave Trade shaped our world profoundly and through a myriad of ways still does.

The best legacy the abolitionists we remember today could have would be a people, us, who took the time to understand why **they** couldn't always sleep, a people who faced the truths of history without averting our eyes; a people who had the courage to try and understand our world as it really is; a people prepared to make a commitment to the scrutiny of our society and its assumptions, and to a renewal of our moral energies, energies for the task of transformation, action and yearning for a world not limited by the present structures, perceptions or even pieties.

And to that end I ask you to stand for our credal affirmation