

Sermon by Inderjit Bhogal.

Service of Commitment of Set All Free – The Long Road to Freedom  
Holy Trinity, Clapham. 6<sup>th</sup> September 2005

“Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.” Ex.5:1

## Introduction.

Greetings in the name of Christ.

I thank you all for making the time and space to be here tonight, and I thank Holy Trinity, Clapham for, not only hosting us, but for the history, the memory associated with this place in relation to struggles against the monstrous slave trade.

Most of us here have met around a vision that we want to mark 2007 as an important mile-stone in the struggles against slavery, recognising that – while there were around 10million people in slavery worldwide in 1807, to our shame there will be over 20 million people in slavery worldwide in 2007.

## Set All Free.

With the support of all the organisations we represent, and others, the ‘Set All Free – Act to end Slavery’ project has been established, and a project Director and Officer are in place. We have an executive committee, and a wider co-ordinating group to guide and support the project.

Considerable work has already been undertaken, and we have an agenda.

We are here therefore to share together in this service of commitment, to launch the Set All Free project, and to Commission our Director and Officer, in the context of worship and prayer. Set All Free is a project of the church. It is a collaboration between churches, church related groups, societies and agencies, and others who are happy to work with a Christian ethos to ‘act to end slavery.’ We are a partnership of black and white Christians – utterly dedicated to opposing the disgrace of slavery in all its forms. We meet on this ground to affirm the Christian tradition of questioning and opposing injustice.

Our motivation is Jesus Christ and his vision of the kingdom of God in which all belong equally.

## Biblical Witness

Biblical witness begins with an affirmation that God is the Creator, and that human beings are created – male and female, black and white. **“In the Image of God.”** This means there is one race, the human race.

However, human perverted selfishness (sin) has so fractured human relationships that, as Aristotle writes in his Politics:

“Humanity is divided into two: the masters and the slaves.”

The Sons of Noah – Ham, Shem and Japheth represent human diversity, as do the Sons of Abraham (Isaac and Ishmael), yet the curse of Ham (and his black son Canaan) and the banishment of Ishmael and his black mother Hagar show us that discrimination, racial hatred and religious bigotry is part of Biblical witness too. The Bible is a story of human failings in the context of which we hear of Gods unfailing commitment and faithfulness to people.

The story of Jesus, his humble birth, his ministry of preaching the kingdom of God, of transformation, his passion and crucifixion, his resurrection and ascension, demonstrates the depths of the love of God, and Gods mission in Christ to reconcile all things, a mission that desires wholeness, the fullness of life for all.

We acknowledge, and confess, with penitence, that the Bible which records the stories of human failings and God's faithfulness and has been the basis of Christian faith, has also been used to sanction, or support, or justify inhumanity, injustice and violence – the most vile of which has been the Transatlantic Slave Trade which took African women, men and children to England, the Americas and the Caribbean – and which developed from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century into a transportation of Indian indentured labour from India to the Caribbean and also to Africa.

The doctrine of the Image of God is enshrined in Scripture and in Christianity, yet Institutional Christianity did not question the institution of slavery until recent history.

Christ did not explicitly talk of slaves and this was taken to imply they were excluded from divine grace.

The New Testament also sees Christian Discipleship as service/slavery. Jesus himself is said to take on “the form of a slave.” [Ph.2:6-11]

St Paul recommended that slaves serve their masters “with fear and trembling”. The Epistle to Philemon describes how the apostle returned a fugitive slave, Onesimus, to his master. That action was later used by churches to reject the idea that escaping slaves had the right to sanctuary in their church, as common criminals did.

## **The Institutional Church**

St John Chrysostom advised the slave to prefer the security of captivity to the uncertainties of freedom. St Augustine agreed. St Ambrose, commenting on the Epistle to the Colossians, believed that masters had duties to slaves. The General Council of the Christian Church (C.345) at Gangra, in Paphlagonia (Turkey) condemned all who under pretext of religion taught slaves to despise their masters. The Council of Carthage (419) refused the right even of enfranchised slaves to bear witness in court. Pope Leo the Great proclaimed in 443 that no slave could become a priest. And so on the story goes. The Institutional church did not question the institution of slavery.

## **The Abolitionists**

Yet we know of a strong tradition of Christian objection to the slave trade – on the basis of Church Gospel. I visited Wilberforce house in Hull. The Major of Hull came to greet me. As I stood there by a statue of Wilberforce I noticed the words inscribed below it:

“England owes to him the reformation of manners. The world owes to him the abolition of slavery.”

I asked the mayor what kind of manners Wilberforce required of England.

Without hesitation she replied, “Respect for all and reverence for all.”

Wilberforce was a contemporary of John Wesley and was encouraged and supported by Wesley who wrote his 'Thoughts upon Slavery.' Wesley called on the captains of the slave trade to “immediately quit this horrid trade”. Wesley's pamphlet was “the most serious onslaught on slavery, as well as the trade, that had yet been made.” (Thomas, Hugh 1997. The Slave Trade. Picador; London p.475)

The slave trade took 40 years of struggle to bring it to an end.

Long before Wesley and Wilberforce, the Africans themselves had struggled against slavery. They ran subversive, secret underground routes to bring down the slave owners. Frederick Douglass, “an American slave”, learned to read and write, escaped, determined to live free or die, and helped others to resist slavery and find freedom. Oluado Equiano gained his freedom and went on to play a strong and eloquent role in the abolition of the slave trade. He visited Hull in 1792. He called on people to do justice, mercy and walk humbly.

Wilberforce said he would not rest until the slave trade was abolished. People like Wilberforce, Wesley and Equiano rest in God now, but slavery lives on – and respect and reverence for all is not yet achieved.

## **Memory**

We are Christians together honouring the memory of those church men and women who spoke out against the slave trade, acknowledging that churches also have a history of complicity and collusion, with the slave trade.

From the moment God saw the misery of the enslaved children of Israel in Egypt, and heard their cry, and called Moses to go and confront Pharaoh to **‘let my people go’** – there is a recognition that God is a God of freedom, who is committed to bring the people home again. The memory of freedom from Egypt, the Exodus from Egypt, has been the most powerful force in the history of Israel. This memory gave them hope of freedom during a further enslavement in Babylon and beyond that it has kept alive a hope of a new exodus, a return to Jerusalem, a return home.

In the Christian story this memory is transferred to Jesus who set out on his exodus journey when he set his face like a flint to head towards Jerusalem; It is a memory that recalls the freedom from sin assured in Jesus; It is a memory kept alive in Christian witness and worship and recalled every time we meet to break bread and to do this in remembrance of him; it is a memory that looks ahead to the heavenly banquet prepared for all, for here we have no abiding home.

## **‘Let my people go.’**

What for?

‘So that – they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’

Bondage gives ways to a bonding, to a life of a covenant relationship with God.

Exodus from Egypt is not only a liberating moment but a movement of an ongoing commitment. People are not only freed, but God commits Gods own self to a life of solidarity with the children of Israel.

## **Slavery Today**

There is more slavery than ever today. Today’s slavery includes debt bondage, child labour, sex trafficking, people trafficking for labour, servile forms of marriage, forced marriage, cheap house cleaners, cheap migrant labour, unjust trade rules, poverty and so on.

Burger Bars are the biggest toy distributors today. What conditions do toy makers work in, what is their wage, to enable wealthy children to have free toys?

What sweaty, cramped, low wage conditions of “third world” workers enable people to have cheap CD players, TV’s and so on?

How much money do such workers receive for making sporty trainers for which people readily pay £50, £60, £70 or more?

What about the appalling slavery of Dalits in India? What about Asylum Seekers detained in Britain who are paid about £10 per week “if they work”?

What about illegally employed migrant workers on British farms, and others like Cackle Pickers?

## **Racism**

The lasting legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade is formulated in the scandal of racism that has continued to enslave black people. In the moral exhaustion that followed the end of slavery racism acquired a new vigour in the former slave societies of the Americas and European Empires. Much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can scarcely be understood without taking that legacy into account.

We live with it today. It is manifested in our 9/11's and 7/7's and perhaps most clearly in these last few days in USA where the poorest, the elderly, and the black communities have been left to suffer or die following Hurricane Katrina.

## **We can all do something**

Slavery – in all its forms is a disgrace, and usually associated with the economy. Jubilee 2000, and movements like the Trade Justice Campaign, and Make Poverty History have demonstrated the power we can all exercise with Government.

We can also influence policy through ethnical shopping, and investment.

Buy fairly – traded goods.  
Boycott slave trade goods.  
Invest ethnically.

## **We can all do something.**

My hope – as we launch ‘Set All Free – act to end Slavery’ is that this will be a strong and transforming movement in which there will be wide participation and listening again to each other and to stories not heard before, and which will be an effective Christian witness against all slavery. I ask you for your support, prayers and participation.

In the Name of Christ. Amen.