



# wilberforce

l e c t u r e t r u s t

FREEDOM IS COMING! OH! YES I KNOW!  
WILLIAM WILBERFORCE MEMORIAL LECTURE

By

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THE ARCHBISHOP OF YORK

CITY HALL, HULL - 30 OCTOBER 2007

I have just returned from the West Indies. In Jamaica, I went to the Spanish Town and stood on the steps where the Governor, on the first of August 1838, read the Emancipation Declaration setting all slaves free. The chains that shackled the slaves were released and buried in a nearby Baptist Church. Like us, people there were commemorating the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Africans. Note that I said 'commemorating', not celebrating.

As Bishop Reid of Jamaica said "we cannot celebrate things which should not have started in the first place". His great-great-great grandfather, James Knight, a slave on the Lyndhurst estate in Manchester, Jamaica, had come to learn that the Lord Jesus loved him and had set him free, not from his state of bodily enslavement to earthly masters, but from his enslavement to sin. He started preaching to his fellow-slaves, a practice forbidden even to Ministers of the Gospel. A house slave and therefore educated, he read the Bible to other slaves late at night teaching them especially the Lord's Prayer and its focus on the coming Rule of God. James was persecuted as a ringleader. He fled and continued to preach. He was hounded from place to place. Yet this missionary was not deterred from preaching the freedom offered in the Gospel of Christ and the coming of God's kingdom of justice. He was eventually captured in Black River and killed. His head was cut off – leaving his body in Black River. The killers marched from the place of execution with James' head on a pole as a lesson to other slaves. Finally leaving it hanging at Skull Point, formerly called "Manhead" by the slaves. James Knight's skull was never buried, but was eventually kicked to pieces in contempt and dishonour. His memorial remains emblazoned in two words "SKULL POINT" down the centre of the present Way Post outside the Cottage Police Station in Mile Gully, Manchester. I salute and honour the memory of one of Africa's forebears sold into slavery, JAMES KNIGHT: Slave, Runaway Slave, Missionary, Christian Martyr whose last words were, "Onnu see dah same gospel weh onnu a kill ni fa, it gwine run inna dis country like wata."

Do you know that some plantation owners refused to let slaves have their children baptised, for fear that it would confer upon them an equal status? It suited them to regard slaves as sub-human – objects to be bought and sold.

Some slaves rebelled. For example, in Montego Bay, in the Parish of St James, trials took place in the Court House in 1832 of slaves who took part in the Rebellions of 1831 – 1832. The slaves who were found guilty, including Sam Sharpe, were hanged in the square and at the Albert Market. Sam Sharpe was tried at the Court House on the 19th of April and hanged in the square on the 23rd of May 1832.

On the 29th of July 1833 the British Parliament passed the Emancipation Act that became law on the 1st of August 1834. Slavery was abolished and all children under six were free, but all other slaves had to serve six years of apprenticeship. On the 1st of August 1838 all were emancipated. It was from the balcony of the Court House that the Act was officially read in St James's Parish, Montego Bay. Very near to the place where the Mayor of Montego Bay handed me the Key of the City – a free man and Citizen of the City – on 11 October 2007.

The Wilberforce House Museum here in Hull tells the slaves' story: their working conditions, what they had left behind in West Africa and how they sustained their faith in the face of grotesque inhumanity. The slave owners tried to enslave their body, spirit and mind. They did not succeed in enslaving their spirit. They knew God and trusted Him implicitly. Their bodies and minds, however, were enslaved. Two hundred years ago their bodies were set free but as Marcus Garvey said, popularised in song by Bob Marley, the task still remains to 'emancipate the mind from mental slavery'.

Today, in Jamaica, the ex-slaves are the people whose lives are being commemorated. Not Wilberforce. Though gracious towards British Christians and appreciative of the good things of their Anglican inheritance, the real heroes of the anti-slavery movement for West Indian Christians are their own forebears. Names of Sam Sharpe, James Knight, Scott, Nichols, Roach, Roberts, Walcott, Seymour, Marson, Campbell, Bennett, Olanda Equiano come to mind. They are trying to forgive the slave owners and slave traders who dehumanised their ancestors: Africans and Europeans alike.

Together with them we are relieved, humbled and grateful, that the evil of legalised Transatlantic Slave Trade in Africans has been identified, exposed and ended – at least in Britain and its former colonies. We must remember that history does not flow in straight lines – it is curved with twists and turns, ironies and surprises. It records that the campaign to end the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Africans and slavery itself began among the very people who started the trade and had the most to lose from its abolition. It records as well that yesterday's criminals, slaves who were hanged for making the system not work, are today's heroes. We do well to hear the voices of the children of the traders – Wedgwood, Wilberforce, Clarkson with the voices of the children of the traded – Equiano, Scott, Sharpe as well as the cries of nameless others on both sides of the Atlantic.

The abolitionists, both black and white, believed freedom was coming and they turned that hope into reality. Very much like Black South Africans who during the dark days of Apartheid sang "Oh! Freedom is coming. Oh! Freedom is coming. Oh! Jesus is coming. Oh! Jesus is coming. Oh! Yes I know".

It happened because some people were gripped by God – and their moral blindness cured. They were equipped with a determination to achieve the seemingly impossible. It was against the odds. It was against the tide of public opinion.

The distinguished historian Simon Schama looks back at the British parliament's eventual change of heart and calls it "a spectacular act of irrationality". This is because slavery was one of the biggest contributors to the British economy and vested interests wanted it, just as people wanted sugar in their tea and cheap metal bracelets, 'manillas', were but luxury goods exchanged for slaves in West Africa.

Yes, manufactured goods, including cheap metal bracelets, 'manillas', which became the currency of the slave trade, were shipped from British ports to West Africa where they were traded for slaves and shipped on 'the middle passage', 5-or-600 at a time, to British colonies in North America and the Caribbean where those who survived were auctioned for luxury goods such as rum and sugar for the British market.

A deadly 'triangle of trade' in which it is estimated that 3.4 million Africans died or were sold into slavery.

Why the 'U turn'? Politicians are not renowned for admitting mistakes or pursuing minority causes, especially where people's pockets and appetites are affected.

And so you may ask, "What has all this to do with Hull today?"

Hull was a prosperous port, but it wasn't at the centre of the slave trade. William Wilberforce was one of its wealthy sons. He became its MP at the age of 21. Later he was to represent Yorkshire. He was leading a pretty wild life, a habit learned at Cambridge University. Didn't happen to me when I was there!

Wilberforce was an elf-like, sociable, quick-witted and instinctively conservative figure. A ladies' man and a gambler. Somebody described him as a mere shrimp – but a shrimp who was to become a whale.

That's because God changed him. This dissolute little man, not short of charm or eloquence, was suddenly converted. William Wilberforce turned his life over to Jesus Christ. His newly found faith demanded political action as well as piety. So it should. "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of his Church and the good of the nation", wrote John Newton to Wilberforce. Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace" was himself a convert to active Christianity, having at one time been involved in the slave trade himself.

Now let's move to Clapham Common in London, not far from where I served as a Vicar for 13 years. There's a church on the edge of Clapham Common – Holy Trinity Church. Wilberforce joined an influential group of men there, who came to be known as the Clapham Sect. Thank God for them. They were ridiculed for their practical Christianity and their determination to clean up this country. Their faith translated into social reform. They started missionary societies, schools, a child literacy movement, and the RSPCA.

Members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) had led the way in opposing the slave trade. The famous Methodist preacher John Wesley was a supporter too. Let's give credit to them all.

And especially Thomas Clarkson. The youngest contemporary student to William Wilberforce. He was a tall studious man with liberal political views. He was the person whose Cambridge Latin essay prize of 1785, "Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?", really ignited the cause. He was one of the tireless workers and it was he who influenced Wilberforce to make this a personal campaign. Clarkson rode round the country gathering evidence of the slave trade, notably in Bristol and Liverpool. He provided the facts for Wilberforce's speeches. He wrote pamphlets and books, campaigned to encourage people to give up sugar and tried to persuade the French to abandon the slave trade. He burned himself out and spent most of his money.

His powerful gifts as an organiser helped to galvanise the abolitionist movement and to bring the cause into the main stream of political thinking and moral action. But he believed freedom was coming and he dedicated himself to turning that hope into a reality.

Wilberforce was the person whose dogged determination in Parliament, encouraged by William Pitt and John Newton, eventually succeeded in the passing of The Abolition of Slave Trade Act. Wilberforce's evangelical faith inspired his continued pressure on the House of Commons from his first speech in 1789 until the passing of the Act eighteen years later.

Wilberforce was one of a team – he was an outstanding speaker, so he used his gift for the cause. That's important. Each person did what they could; it was teamwork with each contributing their particular strength and they encouraged one another with their persistence.

It took Wilberforce and colleagues 18 years of continuous parliamentary activity before they saw results. There were many setbacks. Public opinion was fickle. Erstwhile supporters changed sides. Slave traders prompted delaying tactics and bribed witnesses. But in the end, truth and justice prevailed. That was 200 years ago and that's why we are commemorating Wilberforce today.

Even then slave trading continued illegally for a while and the ownership of slaves continued legally until 1833 when the Abolition of Slavery Act was passed – the year of Wilberforce's death. Clarkson and Wilberforce's hopes had not been fully realised by the Act of 1807. But they continued campaigning to the end.

As you can imagine, the Act of 1807 did not immediately achieve all that had been hoped for. A fine of £100 for each slave found on a British ship often resulted in slaves being thrown overboard when a Naval vessel appeared on the horizon – though the passing of another Act in 1827 eventually dealt with that.

Today we commemorate the vision of Wilberforce and his companions, their persistence, their courage and their teamwork. Their example should inspire and prompt us to expose and denounce all forms of oppression today. For slavery still persists.

It is reckoned that there may be 27,000,000 people enslaved today. For them freedom is barely a hope and certainly not a reality.

In some countries today people have sold themselves and their children in payment for debt. In Haiti it is reckoned that 200,000 children are domestic slaves in Port au Prince. The number of bonded labourers in Pakistan may be as high as 1m. In Niger, slavery was only criminalised in 2003.

Oh! Freedom is coming. We all must turn that hope into reality.

A joint research team, from the University of Hull and Anti-Slavery International, explored the contours of modern slavery in the U.K. in a Report entitled, Contemporary Slavery in UK: Overview and Key Issues.

The report attempted to answer the question: What is slavery? Because of the considerable confusion about the nature and boundaries of slavery. Very much like the nature and boundaries of racism and institutional racism which we tackled in the Stephen Lawrence Murder Inquiry. The Report defined slavery by saying that there are three essential elements of the exploitative relationship which constitute slavery:

- severe economic exploitation;
- the lack of a human rights framework; and
- control of one person over another by the prospect or reality of violence. Many relationships of enslavement do not involve actual physical violence but the nature of the relationship – appalling working and housing conditions, the withdrawal of passports or ID documents, deceit and abuse of power, the use of physical intimidation – renders the possibility of flight remote. There is much evidence that those who do protest about such conditions may be beaten, abused, raped, deported or even killed.

The Report also distinguished slavery from poor working conditions. It said that it is important to distinguish poor – or even appalling – working conditions from slavery. Coercion is the key distinction: the enslaved person has no real alternative but to submit to the abusive relationship. Abuse refers to the treatment of one person by another specific person and is distinct from being forced into dangerous or difficult work by economic circumstances or other impersonal forces.

The Report found that:

- Modern slavery exists in the UK in various forms. All exhibit the common elements of the exploitative relationship which have always constituted slavery: severe economic exploitation; the absence of a framework of human rights; and control of one person over another by the prospect or reality of violence. Coercion distinguishes slavery from poor working conditions.
- It is, however, very difficult to compile precise statistics about the extent of slavery in the UK and official figures are widely recognised to be substantial underestimates. Slavery in the UK often comes to light only when a crisis occurs.

• Trafficking into the UK for sexual or domestic labour involves hundreds or even thousands of women and children. Some children, in particular those from African countries, are trafficked from the UK to other countries. Last week we read in the papers and saw it on our television screens last night how nine French Charity Adoption Workers who were debarred at the airport in Chad for using their charity for transporting 120+ children supposedly from Saifur to homes in France are now charged with "trafficking". The Head of UNICEF in France said that most of the children destined for 120 families in France did not appear to be orphans. We heard the cries of the children for their mothers.

The Report also found that:

- Some forms – such as child labour – have existed for years but are increasingly constrained by international conventions to protect the rights of children. Although child labour is prohibited in the UK, there is a connection with the UK through the conditions under which sports wear and clothing, or commodities such as tea or cocoa, are produced. The Report on child labour in India for Gap Clothing was exposed on Sunday.

I say it doesn't have to be like that.

Hands up all those who like chocolate.

Let me ask you a question and present you with a challenge.

Will you promise to buy only FAIRTRADE chocolate from now on? If you can't find it in your favourite shop, ask to see the manager and say that you will only buy goods which are not produced by slave labour. Which ones? Say you want to trade fairly. Will you promise? If you keep that promise, you could be playing your part in ending a 21st Century iniquity.

The Report on "Contemporary slavery in UK : Overview and Key Issues" went on to say that:

- Some UK-based companies, knowingly or not, rely on people working in slavery to produce goods which they sell: complex sub-contracting and supply chains, managed by agents elsewhere, often obscure this involvement.
- The UK has tended to address trafficking as an issue of migration control rather than one of human rights.
- Most trafficked people enter the UK legally but become subject to forced labour through a mix of enforced debt, intimidation, the removal of documents and an inadequate understanding of their rights. Statutory agency personnel are often unsure how to assist trafficked migrant workers and keep few or no records as to their subsequent well-being.
- Slavery in contemporary Britain cannot be seen in isolation. Most of those working as slaves in the UK have come from elsewhere, often legally. Slavery is an international issue.

Oh! Freedom is coming – help turn that hope into a reality.

For there are even more subtle forms. When a youngster joins a gang, he gives up his freedom – he sells himself, loses his identity, hands over his conscience to the group. It's a bit like an addict, who will do anything for a fix. He needs to be liberated, now, in the 21st Century.

It's not just boys who lose their individuality. 45% of 13-18 year old girls are eating less calories than they should. 77% said they felt fat, ugly and depressed after seeing pictures of physically perfect models and celebrities. The current uninformed stigmatisation that all those who are curvaceous are obese does not help.

I want children and young people to be free of these phoney influences and over-generalizations. I want them to grow up confident with their own personalities and bodies. I want their heroes to be saints, not pop stars or gang leaders. I want them to change the world, not to give in to it. What better place to start than Wilberforce's town – here in Hull?

I have committed myself to raising £1.5m for a new Academy – the Archbishop Sentamu Academy in East Hull. The government will provide the rest. And the good news is that the government has approved money for the development of a feasibility study. In short, the go ahead has been given. It will be more than just a school. Its students will come from the locality and be shown that what they can do for their neighbourhood is at least as important as what they can do for themselves. They will be taught that character matters more than celebrity. The Academy's ethos will be Christian: open to all and for the benefit of all. I pray that every boy and girl who benefits from a place there will have written on their heart the biblical texts, "If Christ shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

This will be an Academy with a difference. We will get the Academy ready to receive pupils and not the usual failed expectation of getting pupils ready for the school. It will be a centre of excellence and life long learning. An Academy for the whole community. As we Africans say, now as an African Yorkshire man, "It takes the whole village to raise, nurture and educate a child." It will take the whole of East Hull to educate a child at the Archbishop Sentamu Academy. That is why the Archbishop Sentamu Academy will be FANTABULOUS.

As Mahatma Gandhi said in his memorable epigram: "Be the change you want to see in the world. Live today as if you would die tomorrow. Learn today as if you will live for eternity."

This is what the Archbishop Sentamu Academy will be offering to all. We will stand together or hang separately. We will sink or swim together. That is the true meaning of partnership. All pupils will be welcomed regardless of their class, colour, culture, economic status, ethnicity, religious affiliation or none. For all are created in the image and likeness of God. They will be treated with dignity and respect. The Archbishop Sentamu Academy will take in ordinary pupils and turn them into extraordinary Yorkshire men and women. Each one will be perceived as a potential saint. No one will be left behind.

You may have heard the story of a jumbo-jet that developed serious engine trouble in mid-Atlantic. The captain told the passengers and asked their permission to open the hold and dump all their luggage in the ocean. "Yes, yes, yes," they all cried. It was done.

Thirty minutes later the captain said, "We are still losing altitude. We must get rid of all your hand luggage. The cabin crew will collect them and when we have dropped to a safer altitude they will throw them out." "But of course," the cries went out. And it was done.

An hour later the captain said, "We still need to lose more weight. Fifty people will be safely dropped into the water with their life-jackets. This airline operates an Inclusive Equal Opportunities Policy. And we shall now put it into operation. We shall use the alphabet to guide us.

A – are there any Africans on board?  
Silence.  
B – are there any Blacks on board?  
Silence.  
C – are there any Caribbeans on board?  
Silence

A little black boy turned to his father and said, "Dad, who are we?"  
The father replied, "We are Zulus!"

£1.5m. Far less than the turnover of the slave trade 200 years ago. I need really generous donations, from people who will themselves be stakeholders in a new generation, liberated from peer-fear, free from the stranglehold of fashion, released to discover and share a vision and a passion to change the world. I need gifts from rich and poor alike. IT COULD BE YOU!

I am glad the Academy has the full backing of my Diocesan Board of Education, Council and Synod, Hull City Council, the Government, our Local MP, John Prescott – who is excited about it.

What is on offer is the radically new and I will not let go until it is thoroughly done. After all, Bishop Roy Williamson in 1994, at the official opening of Holy Trinity Church, Tulse Hill, for the whole community, described me as a Ugandan whose characteristics were those of a Yorkshire terrier – with tenacity and a firm grip, only letting go to get a firmer grip. I am honoured the people of Yorkshire have taken me into their homes and hearts. Let us all build for the future. Live today as if tomorrow is already here.

We will honour William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, the Clapham Sect, the slaves who were real champions of freedom and all those who spent their lives in the pursuit of others' freedom, if we apply ourselves to tackle the injustices of our own day. There is much to be done. We have the ability, the resources to do it. We just need the will. The will.

It is for all of us today to stand up against the unfinished business of all that enslaves human beings – the slavery of trafficking women and children for sexual exploitation, the enslaving of children as soldiers, the evils of leading young people into the slavery of drug addiction, and enslavement into bonded and forced labour, the enslavement of living in poverty – especially child poverty; not to mention the global bondage of all nations to armaments and warfare.

We are all implicated. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible".

What drove Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and their colleagues of the time, and countless brave slaves, was what must drive us – a refusal to accept the prevailing consensus when it conflicts with our deep-seated conviction that "in the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high has broken upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1 verses 67 & 79)

You and I have one life on this earth. One chance to make a difference.

When your life is over and people look back on what you have accomplished, may they be able to say "he left this world a better place," "she left this world a better place".

Thank God for Wilberforce and all the others. Follow their example. Make a difference. Oh! Freedom is coming. Turn hope into reality. For we have been Called to Freedom, Work for Justice and Embrace Responsibility. I have today signed Hull's Wilberforce 2007 petition against modern day slavery. I hope you will do the same and let your signature be a mark of your personal commitment.

You and I have much to do. God bless you.