

Letter from the Vicar

Friday 31 July 2020

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Yesterday the Church of England commemorated the lives of William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano, and Thomas Clarkson. All three were influential social reformers and anti-slavery campaigners of the 18th and 19th Centuries, whose combined efforts helped bring about the abolition and outlawing of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807. With the focus in recent months on the *Black lives matter* movement it was, for me as I said Morning Prayer in church, a salient reminder of the injustices humanity has meted-out on people of different colour, background, and creed in the past, and indeed continues to exploit and demean to this day. I'm not sure when this commemoration was added to the Church's calendar but I for one am profoundly thankful. During my time as Precentor of Westminster I was involved in a Service of dedication for a memorial to Olaudah Equiano, housed in St Margaret's Church. The Abbey already had a statue to Wilberforce but it was particularly powerful to be involved in commemorating an African slave who had won his freedom and who worked to right the wrongs and prejudices of society.

As a boy at school I knew nothing about Equiano. I had heard of Wilberforce and Clarkson but Equiano was side-lined. History was never my favourite subject. When asked a question "do you agree with X or Y?" I would answer, having weighed up the evidence and source material, "Yes" or "No". My teachers were always displeased with the bluntness of my answers as they wanted to see my working and how I had evaluated the evidence. But that was not what the question asked! As I have matured my appreciation of our past and the way in which it can and does shape our future has grown immeasurably. I am hopeful that our society can learn lessons from past actions. Just like the meaning of Scripture has been unlocked in recent decades by reading the scriptures with a particular agenda for liberation, now is the time to remove the bias from the way in which we have traditionally reported our national story and explore the evidence of yesteryear with the lenses of equality and justice.

STOP PRESS: As I am typing the Government has decided to pause the latest round of relaxation measures of lockdown. I don't intend to rehearse them all here but I would like to highlight 2 changes which affect our common life as a Church. The first is that **face coverings will now be mandatory for places of worship from Sunday 9 August**. I am awaiting the Guidance as to what this means for those of us who lead our services. Of course you are most welcome to wear a face covering before then, in fact you are strongly encouraged to do so but it will not be enforceable until next week. The second change was that government guidelines had permitted singing by a small and distanced group to sing during services from tomorrow. This would have meant a small choir would have been able to sing during our services, although we – the congregation – would not. This permission, however, also appears to have been rescinded. I will keep you posted as to when this will be possible in the future.

This past week St John's hosted its first funeral for many months. During lockdown all funerals were conducted at Crematoria but on Thursday the doors were open again to allow family and friends of the deceased to say their farewell to their loved one and offer thanksgiving in this house of prayer. The congregation all complied with social distancing. It was too large to be accommodated in church so additional speakers were erected so that those gathered outside could also join-in and pay their respects. This may well become a pattern for how events and services will need to be in the coming months. It has certainly got me thinking again about holding open-air services now that logistics seem to have been sorted.

From Sunday afternoon until Monday 10 August my family and I are taking some time-off together. If you need to contact a priest during this time please contact Ruth, whose details are below. Like many who have been working through lockdown my brain is exhausted by all the changes we have been forced to make and I look forward to being able to 'switch-off'. That being said, I will still be holding you in my prayers.

I hope you stay safe and well, confident and enfolded in the love of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

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