

## **SERMON FOR EASTER 5 | 10.05.2020**

6: 8-12, 7: 55-end; 1 Peter 2: 2 Acts -10; St John 14: 1-14

**'In my Father's house are many rooms...'** Perhaps this great picture of heaven – of everyone milling about recognizing one another, talking and laughing in some kind of never-ending celestial party isn't the very best one for today with us all still waiting for an announcement from Boris about lock-down. But it has been set as today's Gospel so what can we make of it this morning?

To make sense of the other things I want to talk about, not least the evil that is slavery, can I invite you to catch at least a flavour of the Gospel passage and its description of heaven - "VE Day in Trafalgar Square in May 8th 1945" but on a pan--universal scale - the place stacked with people who will be both immensely happy to be there and overjoyed to be meeting with everyone once again - friends, families and even enemies: all races, all types, all abilities, all of creation indeed - equally free and equally happy.

You might want to add another description of heaven, this time in St John's second great work, the book of Revelation: *Now all shall live with God: they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will be their God and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning, no crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...*

As a description of heaven, I doubt many will want to challenge much of what I said. After all, isn't that what we have been striving to achieve in this life too - a world where justice and peace and equality are available to all?

And yet that picture is incredibly modern - probably no more than 150 years old in fact. Before that class and hierarchy were absolutely inbuilt into every Christian's world view. Take for example the original third verse of *All things bright and beautiful* which ran:

The rich man in his castle,  
the poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
and ordered their estate.

Mrs CF Alexander found nothing wrong in including these words into her 'Hymns for Little Children' - written as recently as 1848!

**And yet those class divisions were as nothing compared with the evil of slavery. It may surprise us that even for the most sincere Christian, including some of the greatest saints like St Gregory of Nyssa, slavery - much like poverty, war or sickness - was regarded as just a brutal fact of life. They would read the words of St Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians that *in Christ Jesus there is neither slave nor free*, not as a levelling-out of the Roman class system or as an indictment of slavery but as an acceptance of it. Indeed in Paul's letter to Timothy we read: *slaves should obey their owners, not just when their master's eye was on them but at all times, with both sincerity and reverence for the Lord.***

**So when did these attitudes begin to be challenged? Not, as one might think, as a result of the 18th century Enlightenment or even the 1789 French Revolution and its cry for liberty, equality and fraternity. Nor did it come from the Puritan settlers in the New World who needed slave labour to exploit their sugar and cotton concessions. Indeed the Puritans were quick to point out that Abraham had been a slave owner and that the Pentateuch (the first five books in the Old Testament) is full of laws concerning the treatment of slaves.**

**Strangely the founding father of the anti-slavery movement was a four foot hunchback by the name of Benjamin Lay, a Quaker, who emigrated from England with his wife Sarah, first to Barbados and then to Philadelphia in the 1730s.**

**Indeed it was Sarah who had been most vocal after seeing a naked African, suspended outside the house of a fellow Quaker. The man had tried to run away and for that he had been savagely whipped, blood dripping from his twitching body, flies crawling over his wounds. Not only had no other passer-by taken a blind bit of notice, Sarah asked how, in a State founded on William Penn's 'Right to Liberty', someone could treat a fellow human in this way? After her death, Benjamin Lay worked tirelessly until the Quakers of Philadelphia finally outlawed slavery in 1759.**

**But for the Lays, their work to get rid of slavery was very much the result of their personal conviction, their awareness of the Holy Spirit working in their own lives.**

**What fired people like the young MP for Hull, William Wilberforce, was rather different. It wasn't the result of economic arguments or even anything to do with the dubious claim that British rule was somehow for the betterment of less developed nations.**

**Nor was it the result of evangelical preachers declaring that the God who had freed the people of Israel from Egypt now demanded the end to slavery worldwide. It was, instead, a passionate response - alongside friends of all faiths and none - to a phrase first voiced by an American diplomat at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, that slavery was *a crime which violated the universal principles of humanity and justice,***

**Perhaps we should pause for a minute and ask why this phrase was so important. The answer, as Rowan Williams points out, was because - for the very first time - people believed that governments should only legislate after their proposals had been fully tested against the views of the whole of society, not just those exercising power. Moreover, if the State was found to be responsible for something 'immoral' (like slavery), then it was the duty of all its citizens to call a halt to that policy because power, rightly exercised, came from below and was not just the prerogative of the privileged few: *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, then who can?* Wilberforce wrote.**

**Sadly the very opposite of this seems to be emerging in the US at the moment where a perfect storm seems to be brewing. Apparently the President has now decided, under pressure from affluent business people, to go against scientific advice and has begun to relax many of Covid-19 regulations - despite the fact that the pandemic has already cost over 100,000 lives and shows little sign of letting up. As Stewart Jones, a Republican senator in South Carolina said recently: *People are fed up. They want their personal freedom back. They want to be able to run their own businesses and run their own lives, unrestrained, unregulated and uninhibited by local or federal government.***

**Whatever else we have learnt from this terrible pandemic, this much is true: in the most painful of ways we have learned to recognise our interconnectedness - and also the contribution we all have to make to restore the common good.**

**Because the under-funding and inequalities in our health care services have not suddenly sprung up from nowhere. As with Sarah Lay in Philadelphia seeing that slave hanging in the street, we have finally woken up and realised that we had allowed ourselves to be blinded to what has been there all the time. In social care funding for example, we can't possibly ignore the fact that it is has been dreadfully underfunded for years. If we can build the 02 Arena Nightingale Hospital in less than a fortnight we can find a solution for those in care homes.**

**Looking back, one of the themes that has emerged from the readings throughout this Easter season has been the invitation to see things with new eyes. What else will the likes of Fergal Walsh and his camera crew need to investigate in order for us to 'see' just what is going on around us? For nearly 1800 years Christians did not 'see' the slavery issue; Benjamin and Sarah Lay and William Wilberforce changed all that.**

**Despite our Gospel reading, we have a fair way to go before we have created a society which approximates to the picture of heaven we spoke of earlier: all races, all types, all abilities, all of creation - equally free and equally happy.**

**As churches, the call remains for us to overcome our latent inertia and to make the effort to 'see' what is happening and to actively hold our government to account when we see things that need to be changed.**

***Living God, for whom no door is closed, no heart is locked: draw us out of our concern with ourselves and enable us to bind the wounds of Christ as found in those we serve. Grant this through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.***