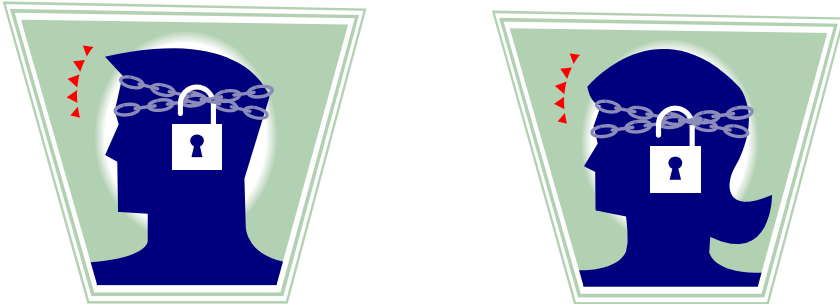


St George the Martyr
Shirley
Lent Course 2012



Can we build a better world?
(Learning from William Wilberforce)

Sunday 26 February: Slavery
5 45p.m. For 6p.m. - 7p.m.

1. **This year's Lent course is potentially a healthy reminder not to take things for granted.** To people living in Shirley in 2012, it is repulsive that (mainly black) people should have been owned by (mainly white) people—owned to the extent that those who were owned had no rights whatever, and their children were born into slavery. To the people of 18th Century England, or most of them, **this wasn't repulsive at all. Slavery was the way things were, and, as far as they were concerned, always had been.** Indeed, for many white people of the time there was something inherently odd in black people who were not slaves. In those parts of the world where there were large numbers of slaves, and the local economy depended on them, black-non slaves were not just odd. They were scary.

2. For those who thought about it at all (and most probably didn't), the Bible apparently recognised slavery as part of how things were: the "divine" order if you like. Then, slavery rescued the slaves from barbarism, and gave them some contact with civilisation: hadn't they often been sold to white traders by

black tribal leaders....and spared being eaten or some other worse fate? The economy depended in part on slavery: where was plantation and other labour to come from, and where was a lot of British shipping to find cargo, if there **was no slavery?** **Hadn't the much envied Classical Greek civilisation been built on slavery?** **Maybe the slaves looked human, but weren't they an entirely different (and inferior) form of humanity - not thinking or feeling the way we did?** If slavery were to be challenged because it contravened the equality **that God wanted between all people, couldn't the same argument be applied** to the inequalities between rich and poor, men and women, children and adults, nobility and commoners, masters and servants?

3. Every time “the way we have always done things” has been threatened, there have been plenty of folk ready to defend vested interests....and to invoke **the name of God for keeping things as they are.** It isn't all that long ago that children in Sunday School sang

*“The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate:
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.”*

Where the Church was part of the Establishment, it was very natural [though very wrong?] for the Church to cling to the same fallacies that the rest of the Establishment supported and benefited from. People genuinely saw overthrowing the established order, including slavery, as being as dangerous as putting the lunatics in charge of the asylum or the criminals in charge of the prison. (Note that in America, the North being anti-slavery and the South pro-slavery **didn't mean that when the North won the Civil War, everyone in the North** opted for equality between black and white; and South Africa clung to apartheid long after slavery had been officially abolished.)

4. The end of civilisation as we know it was forecast by the resisters to change in the debates on removing the property qualification for voting; on extending the franchise to women; on universal free education; on comprehensive schools; on the creation of the NHS; on the introduction of the national **minimum wage; on free trade (and its opposite (?) fair trade)...on the St Paul's** and other anti-capitalist protests.... What are the traditional ideas and conventions that you cling to, perhaps to the disadvantage of someone else .. in church or politics, or economics, or society more generally? What are the

things you cling to that really are essential to a just society, and not just to staying within your particular comfort zone? How do you tell the difference... And does it have something to do with *Love one another as I have loved you?*



5. William Wilberforce made himself very unpopular by challenging the accepted ideas on slavery, capital punishment, prisons, health care, education, low standards in public life, poverty, etc. Who are your heroes and heroines of championing change where many others saw no need for change? Is the Church of England a champion of change or a defender of tradition? What about you? If you do support change in any area, do you actually do anything about it, or just sympathise with more active supporters of change?

6. Jesus said that faith could move mountains - in other words, that his followers could tune into his way of thinking, align themselves with him, and, together with him, change things (even the Roman Empire). One of the prominent churchmen contributing to the York courses said that he had seen people living under horrendous conditions show the capacity of faith to reduce mountains to a plain, in very real terms, both here and overseas. Examples? **Is this mountain moving only for the big people, or also for the “small” people in the back row of the pews?**

7. Cicely Saunders, founder of the hospice movement, used to spend at least half an hour with every member of staff every year finding out how they were, in themselves, in their family, in their job. Effecting change certainly includes inspiration, but it also includes attention to detail and sheer hard work. Abolishing slavery, like introducing the minimum wage, required devotion to principle, but also devotion to detail. Major change has adverse consequences for

some, and not just for the wicked! If you were not going to be a slave, would **you still have a job, a home, someone to “look after you”?** If your small business only existed because wages were low, did paying a minimum wage mean unemployment. If we get our principles from God, do we just apply our God principles and leave God to sort out the consequences?

8. How do we personally sift out all those appeal letters that drop through the letter box? How does the church respond?



*Southwark Mission Prayer
 God of faith, deepen our faith
 so we may bear witness to Christ in the world;
 God of hope, strengthen our hope
 so we may be signposts to your transforming presence;
 God of love, kindle our love
 so that , in a fragile and divided world,
 we may be signs of the faith, hope and love
 which we share in Jesus Christ.
 Amen.*