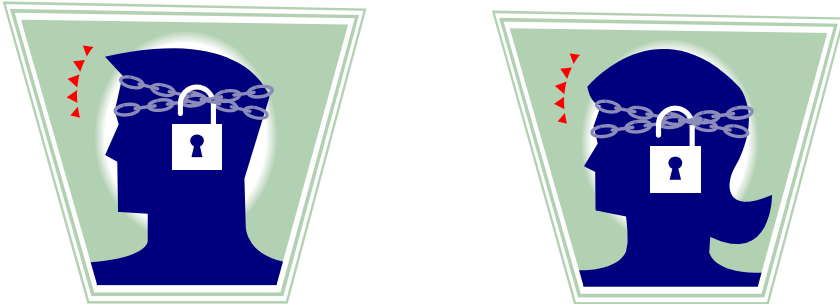


St George the Martyr
Shirley
Lent Course 2012



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

Sunday 25 March: Redemption and Restitution
5 45p.m. for 6p.m. - 7p.m.

1. This gets personal. Jesus upset the religious and political leaders of his time by challenging them to face their own individual and collective sins, instead of focussing (safely) on the people that the leaders themselves had identified as sinners. It was a re-run of the Prophet Nathan enlisting King David's righteous indignation at the behaviour of an un-named bully, and then pointing his finger at the King himself and calling him an adulterer and a murderer. **All this takes us way into our personal discomfort zone. We don't like feeling guilty and we don't like feeling collectively guilty: we are, after all, respectable members of a respectable church community and a respectable civic society.** Anyway, what on earth is collective guilt, and what, collectively or individually, can we do about it?

2. A good starting point is the message from the York course booklet: *Here is a test to find whether your mission on earth is finished: if you are alive, it isn't.* St Paul is sometimes criticised for having a rather high opinion of himself, and you can find quotes to back this view. But if Paul on occasions seems to be

saying that he is the greatest of the saints, you can find more passages in which he is labelling himself the greatest of the sinners. He says specifically **that although he had done a lot, (a) it wasn't him on his own but him letting** Christ work through him, and (b) he had a very long way to go yet. In running terms, he was hardly half way round the track, and a very long and wearily joyful way from the finishing tape. The bishop asked by a keen evangelist **on the top deck of the bus whether he was "saved", replied that he was being** saved. Theologically, you can argue that our redemption was secured once for all on Good Friday, but it would be dangerously naive theology to go on to argue that this, for me or you, is the end of the process. Paul speaks about living out the crucifixion and resurrection, and Jesus invited his disciples to **take up their cross and follow him...and he didn't say anything about being** able to put it down in this life.

3. When in the Early Church slave owner and slave sat together for house communion, they sat together as redeemed sinners and as people equally called to be saints. (It may be that the run-away slave Onesimus that Paul writes about to the slave owner Philemon went on to become a bishop, or what we would now in the Anglican tradition call a bishop.) You sense in the Early Church, in line with Jewish tradition, a keen sense of both individual *and* collective responsibility: a redeemed individual in a redeemed community, an individual sinner in a sinning community. A sense of guilt on its own can be destructive. We need to combine a sense of guilt with a sense of forgiveness.



4. Lists of sins are a mixed blessing. With a long list of sins, we can usually re-**assure ourselves that some aren't our sins, and that some of the sins we don't** commit are rather worse than some of the sins we do commit. But the point of **the sins list is that we need to "let God in" both to deal with Sin in the general** sense (a broken relationship with God and with others) and to deal with our specific addictive/favourite sins - greed, impatience, lust, timidity, jealousy, gossiping, whatever it may be. Wilberforce and his Christian friends were well aware of the risk of concentrating on reforming other people, and overlooking the need for reforming yourself: what Jesus described as **being keenly aware of the splinter in someone else's eye, and totally oblivious to the plank in your own eye.**

5. So much for individual culpability and salvation. What about the collective aspect: collective guilt and collective making amends? In 2006, the **General Synod of the Church of England passed a motion apologising for the Church's** part in the slave trade. Gesture politics? France has just voted that Turkey should feel collectively guilty for early 20th Century massacres. The USA, Australia and New Zealand, hardly shone in their treatment of their native populations. For that matter, the Anglo Saxons were brutal to the native British. The Pope has sort of apologised for the treatment of Jews by Christians. Is part of healing, for victims (or the descendants of victims) and for oppressors (or the descendants of oppressors), repenting and apologising? What about restitution. Restorative justice is a popular theme in discussions of criminal law. Has it a place in international relations...and if it has, how far back do we take this? Have Catholics and Protestants still got things that they need to say to each other...and not just in Northern Ireland?

6. Redemption, with or without Restitution, implies Transformation. We aren't talking just about recognising that wrong has been done (maybe by me) and trying where appropriate and possible to make amends. We are also talking about radical change, and going on to sin no more. The four year old who ended a discussion with his mother, about the two of them promising not to do things that they knew upset the other person, by saying ***There's no point, we wouldn't keep the promises,*** was rather pessimistic about the possibility of transformation. Are we pessimistic or optimistic - about our own capacity for change, about the capacity of other people for change, about the possibility of society changing for the better?

7. Jesus seems to have been optimistic about our capacity for change, and indeed about our capacity, through prayer, and love, and patience, and persistence, to change other people and the society in which we live. Was Judas a Jesus failure, or do we really not know the end of that story? To end where we began: Can we build a better world....and can we learn from William Wilberforce (and others) how to do it?



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.