

LUXURY OR NECESSITY?

Today we celebrate William Wilberforce, champion of justice, servant of God, working tirelessly in the name of Jesus Christ for the abolition of the Slave Trade; following in the footsteps of Moses-his people's deliverer- and taking up the mission of Christ himself: to heal the sick, release the prisoners and bring good news to the poor. Wilberforce: a true Christian hero if ever there was one.

Then we turn to the Gospel reading for this Sunday and find Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, taking a bottle of the most expensive perfume you could buy (several hundred pounds worth in today's money) and pouring it over Jesus' feet. When someone asks if it would not have been better to give this amount of money to feed the poor, heal the sick and bring comfort to the prisoners Jesus declares that Mary has done exactly the right thing.

If you remember, he had had a similar argument with Martha some weeks earlier, when she had complained that Mary was sitting comfortably listening to Jesus while she, Martha, was trying to peel potatoes for Jesus, Mary, Lazarus and twelve apostles. Again, Jesus stuck up for Mary. So not only every Christian Peace and Justice group but every church catering committee is left wondering why on earth they bother.

We seem to be presented with two very different aspects of faith here. Which is "the greater part?" Is it the action – which Jesus himself said was necessary- "*when I was sick you visited me, when I was hungry you fed me, when I was in prison you comforted me. Whatever you do to others, you do to me.*" Or is it this quiet personal devotion? How do you reconcile the two?

The religion of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was a rather pragmatic one. There were a lot of laws to be obeyed and some of those laws concerned the treatment of the poor. You were required to give a generous amount of your income to help those less fortunate and the rules of employment, of money-lending, of social and family care were actually quite strict. Religion was not just about going to church. It was also very much about social justice.

And quite right too. I think we would agree that a religion which does not encourage care for other human beings is a religion not worth having. And a god who does not tell us to love one another is a god unworthy of worship.

The human race has also learned the hard way-and is still learning- that if you allow poverty and injustice to flourish, then sooner or later there will be trouble on a large scale. Many of our great wars and terrorist groups have starting points which can be traced right back to widespread deprivation and gross social injustice. I was intrigued to notice in that passage from Isaiah, where God says that his new social order will be like water springing up in the desert that even the wild animals, the jackals will come to honour God because he provides water for them too. He is not pushing them to the margins, where their only means of survival will be killing. Perhaps Isaiah is hoping that if all people were allowed the right to food and water, freedom and respect, there would be fewer bullies, tyrants, terrorists and warmongers? You never know.

So the religion of Mary and Martha was a practical one and their laws were good. But are good laws alone enough to create good humans?

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Jane Austen's novel, *Mansfield Park*, was written in the wake of the political debate on slavery and she has obviously been thinking about slavery a lot.

Mansfield Park is a large country estate in England owned by Sir Thomas Bertram. On the one hand he is a staunch Christian man of strict principles and impeccable personal morality. On the other hand, his money has been made in the slave trade. His well-dressed, well-behaved family singing their hymns in church every Sunday are living off the profits made by other people's misery and degradation.

There is nothing actually written in the Bible which says, "*Thou shalt not keep slaves.*" So as a Christian man, Sir Thomas might well give orders that the slaves on his plantations were to be treated fairly but that was as far as his duty went. He would never see these people as human beings, equal to himself, deserving of freedom. To him they were simply a commodity to be used to his advantage.

That is the background of the story. In the forefront is the act of Christian charity which Sir Thomas is performing for his family. His wife's sister is poor and is struggling to support her children. Sir Thomas offers to take the eldest girl- Fanny Price- into his home. He will feed her, clothe her and educate her along with his own children. It is a generous offer and the little girl is indeed well-fed, nicely dressed, properly taught. She is far better off in material terms than she would have been at home. But never for one moment is she allowed to forget that she is the poor relation. Never is she able to feel that she can mix on equal terms with her cousins. She is constantly put down in public as well as in private, never expected to have any wishes or opinions of her own. Jane Austen brings out very cleverly the comparison between Sir Thomas' niece and his slaves- the one might have more material comfort than the others but both are treated as less than fully human.

Had you accused Sir Thomas of being unchristian in his business of the Slave Trade; or unchristian in his treatment of Fanny Price, he would indignantly have denied it and quoted chapter and verse to prove himself. Yet to regard any of your fellow human beings as subservient to you; less-than-human goes directly against the commandments of God.

Jesus encountered this same confusion in his own society. He once complained bitterly that religious leaders would feel it right and proper to rescue a donkey that had got stuck in a ditch on the Sabbath Day- because that was what their written law permitted- but they would then take him to task for relieving the pain of a human being on that same day because that was not permitted. *What have our laws come to, Jesus demanded? You are obeying the words but you are missing the spirit completely.*

Good laws do not, by themselves, create good humans.

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There is no doubt that we need a sense of duty. We need to learn that there are things we must do because we ought to rather than because we want to: like going to work when we feel tired, being patient with our children when we are stressed out, giving money to help people less fortunate than ourselves when we would far rather spend it all. We know that we need the discipline of duty because if we always waited until we felt like going to work, or being nice to our children or giving money to charity then we might be in for a rather long wait. Without a sense of duty and laws that compel you to do your duty, you end up with a life and a society that fall apart.

But duty alone can be a grim master. And the necessity of duty without the luxury of love can squeeze all the life out of us.

If you do your duty- whether at work or in your family or in the church- with no true love involved, then you come to grudge what you do. You keep wishing that you did not have to do this. You start to feel sorry for yourself because you are compelled to do it. You can bring no imagination, no flair to your work because your whole inner being is protesting at having to do it. Your energy levels start to flag. Your mind becomes dull and fixed. Your spirit is drained dry. Your heart becomes hard toward other people. Duty alone kills the life in us.

This was what Jesus encountered all the time: men and women who were doing their duty and only their duty by their religion and by their fellow human beings. They were keeping all the rules laid down to ensure that proper time and attention were given to God and to others. But this sense of duty had failed to light up any real love in them. They did not love God. They did not love their church. They did not love their fellow human beings. So they did only what they were compelled to do. They never used their hearts, their minds, their imaginations to worship God and to serve the world. Their religion became grim and oppressive. Their attitude toward each other and to themselves became harsh and unforgiving.

According to the letter of the law they were good people. According to the spirit of the law-which was to inspire love for God and for others- they were failing miserably. &&&&&&&&&&

Now perhaps we can see why Jesus said that Mary had done the right thing in her extravagant act of devotion. This action was one of the few signs he had seen of pure, spontaneous love. There was nothing in the law about tipping expensive perfume over someone's feet but Jesus, as the Son of God, had managed to inspire Mary with so much love, so much new confidence, so much happiness that she simply wanted to pour it all out in this one luxurious act. Jesus did not tell Mary that she should now spend the rest of her life pouring perfume over people's feet. Like all his other followers she was called to feed the hungry, heal the sick, release the prisoners. But he knew that if she could do these things with all that happy, heartfelt love inside her, then she would be freed from an oppressive sense of duty and everything she did for others would become a source of life and delight to her, bubbling up and pouring over. The people she helped for his sake would experience, through her, his liberating love, his deep compassion, his lively and imaginative care. They would feel valued as human beings rather than degraded as objects of charity. This was what true religion should be. It must spring from love and be fed by love or it will wither and die.

William Wilberforce could never have achieved his mighty work for God without that spring of love in his life. He could never have argued so long and passionately against political and religious leaders who told him that he was misguided and foolish. He could never have empathised so strongly with groups of people who were not of his race, nor of his culture and most of whom he had never seen. And this deep love for God and for humanity had come to birth in him many years before, when he had abandoned a life of showing off and partying and joined a religious group called "The Clapham Sect" who spent a lot of time in deep prayer and sincere worship, who pondered long and hard and sympathetically on the woes of the human race and pledged themselves to do something about it in the name of Jesus Christ. Wilberforce found the "nominal" religion of his youth-the church-going duty- coming to new life

in him. God became real and present to him; the human race became dear and precious to him. His work as an MP was no longer just a case of getting attention and attracting votes but a real opportunity to serve Christ in the world. Thus Wilberforce was close enough to God to hear his voice when He called. He was close enough to God to trust in his power when he embarked on the anti-slavery campaign. He was close enough to God not to give up at the first or the second or the thirty-first hurdle but to see the mission through.

Mary of Bethany and William Wilberforce opened their hearts to God and God poured his love into them. This love became a vital, never-ending spring of life. They did their duty to God but this duty was transformed into a generous outpouring of love, something which God had always longed for, since the time when he called the human race into being.

As I said to the children, the time comes when God points his finger and says "*it's you. It is you I need to answer the prayers of my people. It's you I need for this work in my world.*" And most of us want to be involved in some way in making the world a better place. But before we can do this we have to learn to love God and the only way to do that is to allow God to love us. Open our lives to him, stop thinking we are no good, accept gracefully and gratefully all that he wants to give us. Receive the luxury of love and use it to change the world.
Amen.