



GRAY'S
INN

Septuagesima, February 13th 2022

Let us now praise famous men

Exodus 3: 1 – 12 & 2 Corinthians 5: 14-21

Looking at what's been in the News this past week we might detect something of a pattern to our human folly. It goes something like this.

First, denial. It didn't happen. Then, well it might have happened but it wasn't wrong. Well yes, maybe, looking back, it was wrong but at the time no-one saw it that way. Having looked at it again, we do now see that it was wrong and we regret that some other people are still upset by it. OK, it happened, it was wrong, everyone involved should say Sorry, and let's leave it at that. Finally, look, it was all in the past, we can't go back and change it, so for goodness sake, let's just move on.

I refer of course to recent events not in Downing Street – as if I would! - but in the Diocese of Ely. Every Church of England diocese has a Consistory Court, presided over by its Chancellor, usually a judge or senior lawyer, some of them members of this Inn. This month the Ely Consistory Court has been considering a request from Jesus College, Cambridge, for a faculty authorising the removal from the west wall of the college chapel a memorial dedicated to Tobias Rustat, who died in 1694. It's there because Rustat was one of the most significant benefactors of the college, so "Let us now praise famous men". But it's come to light that he made his fortune from the slave trade. He invested in the Royal Africa Company which over 50 years enslaved and transported across the Atlantic 150,000 African men, women and children.

At the hearing members of the student body said that the monument was now so offensive that it should be removed. The Master, the first black woman to head an Oxbridge College, said that she could no longer enter the Chapel. The Bishop of Ely, who delivered last year's Mulligan Sermon here, supported its removal. On the other side some argued that Rustat actually amassed his wealth from sources other than the slave trade. Others pointed to the College's eagerness to accept funding from Chinese sources: with its human rights record, was this not hypocrisy? We await the record and the judgement, but it does raise the more basic question: how **do** we deal with our past?

I've talked before about my time as the assistant Bishop in Bristol, and the reluctance of the city fathers to address their historic involvement in slavery. Since then the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston has been thrown into the harbour and dredged back up again, and in the Cathedral references to him have been removed from the great window erected in his honour. But his monument remains. "Let us now praise famous men". How should they deal with their past?

And will we here be subject to such scrutiny? To my right is the window commemorating Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury. When the monarchy was restored in 1660 William Juxon became Archbishop, and he appears in our East window along with other Archbishops with connections to Grays. When he died only three years later Sheldon took his place. It's something of a mystery why, about a hundred years ago, a former Treasurer wanted to celebrate Sheldon and paid for this window. It's not as if he has the significance of Bishop Lancelot Andrews, on the other side of the War Memorial window. Andrewes had been Queen Elizabeth's Bishop of Winchester, he's buried in what's now Southwark Cathedral because Winchester Diocese then came right up to the Thames, and he played a major part in translating what's now the Authorised Version of the Bible.

And to deepen the mystery, why does Sheldon's window include, if you will excuse the racist language, the Four Blackamoors? For this was not Sheldon's coat of arms but Juxon's, his predecessor. Juxon did indeed have connections to the early English slave trade through commercial dealings, and he included the Blackamoors motif in his redecoration of Lambeth Palace. But there is no evidence that Sheldon had any connection with slavery. Indeed, even with Juxon, it may be more likely that the depiction is more to do with the Crusades, defeating Arab and North African Muslims, than with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Still, in all of this, the question remains: how do we deal with our past? Whether we're talking of past generations, or what the Metropolitan Police may be currently investigating, or indeed our own lives up to now, how do we come to terms with it? Do we simply say, there may have been mistakes, but it's all in the past, we can't do anything about it now, so let's forget it and move on? Or do we need to do more?

In his second letter to the Church in Corinth, which we read as the Second Lesson, St Paul talked about how God deals with sin. He sums it up in this verse: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us".

I take three things from that. First, that there is a problem. There have been trespasses. To put it bluntly, we are sinners. It's not just that people who do not learn from their mistakes are likely to repeat them. It's that there are things which have gone wrong which need putting right. That's true for us, individually and personally, in our public and even more our private lives. And it's also true for the world in which we live and the society we have inherited. We could respond to that by becoming paralysed by guilt. Or we could shrug it off because what's done cannot be undone, so why bother about it? But that doesn't make it go away.

It's at this point that we need to hear the second thing which St Paul says, that in Christ the sin has been cancelled. We need to be careful about this. This is not "forget it and move on". It's that God sees us in a different way. He doesn't see us as we might see ourselves if we're being honest about who we are. Paul says that he sees us "in Christ". For in Christ we have been reconciled to God, not counting our sins against us.

It is in this sense that the old has passed away and there is something new. It is – the third thing – what Paul calls the message of Reconciliation. Be reconciled to God. And then, accept that God has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to us.

Which brings us back, finally, to statues and windows. Slavery, like the Holocaust, remains a deep wound in our history. From the time that Moses was sent to Pharaoh [the First Lesson] with "Let me people go" we have heard the cry for freedom. It still echoes round the world today. As in our personal lives, we need to recognize and confess the past, but in ways which open up the future. And that must mean seeking reconciliation between all peoples, and especially those who still bear the scars of what was done, however long ago. We who find comfort and strength in the God whose love "will not let us go" [the final hymn] need to let that release all people from past failure into a world when God does indeed make all things new.