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June 20th 2021

“Redeeming our past?”

Isaiah 43: 14-21 & Romans 11:33 – 12:2

How do we deal with our past? On the one hand there is our own personal, individual past. What have we learnt from it? Do we feel any remorse or guilt for some of the things we've done or failed to do, and need some way of dealing with that? Or do we say, well we can't go back and change things, so just forget it and move on?

And on the other hand, there is the social and political history which we have inherited and which has shaped who we now are. And again, do we feel any responsibility for that? Are the sins of the fathers “visited upon the sons to the third and fourth generation”, as the Bible puts it. Or do we just shrug our shoulders and say “Well, what's past is past”? Let's just move on.

The questions are of course raised by the current debate about statues, in churches and other public buildings, especially those which commemorate men (and they were almost all men) who supported slavery and made their money from the slave trade. It's part of what has been called “Cancel Culture”, the movement to remove or silence those who have come to represent what is morally objectionable. Some see it as an overdue addressing of past injustice. Others dismiss it as “woke”. How should we deal with our past?

My last parish job was as Vicar of a housing estate on the edge of Oxford, nestled outside the ring road and next to the Cowley Car Works. A tenth of the population were Afro-Caribbean, part of the Windrush generation. They made up over a third of the congregation. Oxford has always been a divided city. White women cleaned the Colleges, black women cleaned the hospitals. But it was only when I also became Area Dean that I fully saw the other side. There was the library of All Souls College, built with money bequeathed by Christopher Codrington, the profits from his slave plantation in Barbados. More about him in a moment. And of course, there is Oriel College, a beneficiary of Cecil Rhodes, one of the founders of racial segregation in South Africa, and the current debate about whether his statue should continue to adorn the outside of the College.

When I became the suffragan bishop in Bristol Diocese the city was only just beginning to come to terms with its past. We ran an ecumenical team unrivalled in the country dealing with homelessness, addiction, industrial relations, marriage care... largely financed by the City trusts, whose origins lay fairly and squarely in the slave trade. When you run programmes for people suffering racial injustice today by using money earnt on the backs of their forefathers, are you redeeming the past? Or, especially if you try to forget its origins, are you avoiding the lessons of history, side-stepping what they might tell you is going wrong today?

In my last job before retirement, I looked after a large chunk of the Church of England's international ministry as chief exec of the mission agency, now called USPG, but originally the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. My time coincided with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. So I went to Barbados to see for myself the slave plantations from which the Church of England had benefitted. When Governor-General Codrington died in 1710 he left his house and half his fortune to SPG. The Society continued to hold slaves for over a century. New ones had to be brought from Africa as four out of ten died within three years. The worst part of this story is that initially they were branded on the chest with an "S". At emancipation in 1833 SPG was paid compensation – eight thousand pounds for 411 slaves.

To mark the Bicentenary in 2007 Radio Four did a three-part documentary. I was put up to be interviewed by Michael Buerk. We did all the usual preparation. Ask, how far can you apologise for what others have done before you, in what sense can you repent of other people's sins? Talk about the other side, all the good that the missionaries had did, how we have given back to the Anglican Church in Barbados much more money than we had taken, how Codrington College is now a seminary where many of the West Indian priests are trained. But Michael Buerk would have none of it and he took me apart. How is it possible for people who call themselves Christians to live with a history in which you did these terrible things, and which you thought you had the right to do just because they were black?

At the very least we must remember our past. [It was amazing last month, as violence flared once more between Israelis and Palestinians, especially over Gaza, that the British government and the British media commented as if it has nothing to do with us, as if the whole situation wasn't created by our imperial invasions, our double-dealing and cowardice under the Mandate, our disregard of other people's rights.]

But having remembered, what more can we do? How do we redeem what has gone before? By regretting it and just moving on? By learning its lessons. By making some reparation? Or by somehow seeking forgiveness, from those whom we or our forefathers have oppressed, and maybe from God?

The prophet Isaiah constantly reminded the people to remember the past, what God had done for them and how often they had turned away. But he also gave the promise that God could redeem them and do new things. So too St Paul in Romans urges us not to be conformed to this world but to discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The Christian faith always holds together Confession and Absolution. It demands that we do not try to hide from our past, whether personally or as a nation. But it also tells us not to wallow in guilt, but to learn the lessons and to seek to make amends. Jesus said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

Sometimes it's difficult to know where or how to put things right. But if we can't redeem our own past, perhaps God can. That's why we finish this morning with John Newton, the 18th century slave trader. Newton made his money as the captain of slave ships sailing the Atlantic 'Middle Passage'. It was during a storm off the coast of Ireland that he had a religious conversion. As he grew in faith, he realised that he had to come to terms with what he had been and what he had done. He was later to write about "a confession, which ... comes too late. It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

But for him there was a way to come to terms with his past, through what he called God's "amazing grace".

*T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far,
And Grace will lead us home.*