

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Sunday, October 26, 2014  
Deuteronomy 15:10-15

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I have a friend in our Companion Diocese of the Windward Islands, on the island of St. Vincent, whose dad knew a slave. Bayliss was not a young man when my friend was born but he is with us still, having recently celebrated his 90th birthday. He is a black man, born on the small island of Tobago, who fought the odds, became a lawyer and was able to bring himself and his family out of poverty. When he was a small boy growing up, he remembers an old man in his community who had been born a slave. When people can live for almost a century, history means something different. To me, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was history - long past and ended history. It was 1834, after all, when full emancipation for all slaves in the British Empire was enacted. And then I met a man - a man I had great conversations with - who was only one step - one generation - away from slavery. This realization, and this one man, shifted my understanding of social change.

As early as the 16th century and as late as the 19th, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade carried millions of Africans through the Middle Passage to the West Indies and North America. It's hard to pin down numbers, but some say up to 60 million Africans died in the process, over the course of 2-300 years. One of the many people who worked in this trade was John Newton. From a young age, he worked on ships, eventually being sold into slavery himself in West Africa. He managed to survive and ended up captaining his own slave ship. Over the years, he gradually became aware of the humanity of the cargo he carried, and the reality of a God who saves. Seeing himself as a wretch, the worst of men, he renounced this work, and returned to England to become a priest. He chose to work on the side of life, rather than in a trade he finally saw as servicing death. He did so because of his experience of amazing grace from a God who he believed had every reason to consign him to death. He confessed his guilt and expressed his faith and hope in the words of one of the most famous songs in history: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me..."

As a parish priest, Newton became a mentor to a young man, William Wilberforce, who, at the age of 21, became the youngest MP ever in England and who we remember and honour today. In the wake of a religious conversion, he considered leaving politics but with the encouragement and advice of the preacher Newton, he decided to serve God in public life and there work for the moral uplift of society. He championed many causes along the way in his conviction that Christian living meant actively working on God's side, the side of life, and he became convinced that there was no greater moral blight on the English conscience than the slave trade.

In 1789, Wilberforce made his first major speech in parliament on the subject of abolition, beginning: "When I consider the magnitude of the subject which I am to bring before the House - a subject, in which the interests... of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved: and when I think, at the same time, on the weakness of the advocate who has undertaken this great cause... it is impossible for me not to feel both terrified and concerned at my own inadequacy to such a task. But when I reflect, however, on the encouragement which I have had... I take courage - I determine to forget all my other fears, and I march forward with a firmer step in the full assurance that my cause will bear me out, and that I shall be able to justify upon

the clearest principles... the avowed end of which is, the total abolition of the slave trade.” What is striking to me about this beginning is Wilberforce’s clear expression of conviction, not in himself or his own merit, but rather in the merit of the God-given passion for a cause beyond himself. I could be cynical and say that it’s simply good rhetoric, but because of what happened next, it certainly seems like an honest and vulnerable expression of conviction.

More than that, he concludes his opening statement by including himself among the guilty: “We are all guilty,” he says, “we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others...” This is part of the power of what Wilberforce did... he took personal responsibility for a social ill he found horrifying. He was never directly involved in the trade except that he was born into a wealthy merchant family that undoubtedly, though indirectly, profited from it. By the late 18th century, the industrial revolution was well underway and the Trans-Atlantic trade was among the foundations on which it, and the entire British Empire, was built. As such, Wilberforce’s position was not exactly popular in the privileged circles in which he moved. Many claimed that the traffic in slaves was far too profitable and the use of slave labour too indispensable to the plantation economy of the colonies to be abolished. But Wilberforce understood that the life of the Empire was being bought by the death of enslaved Africans. And to him, that was unacceptable in the extreme.

What Wilberforce not only understood, but lived in a bold way, was the core Christian belief that our faithful response to God’s amazing grace is first about confession - seeing and admitting the problems we are a part of; and then repentance - changing our beliefs and behaviour, even if it costs us. This core calling of our faith, the boldness and courage to which God calls us, is not about self-interest. Wilberforce really didn’t stand to gain anything except peace of mind from his work. Rather, the core calling of our faith is about looking beyond ourselves and our own needs or desires, to participate in the mission of God to the world God loves. The promise of it, the hope in setting ourselves aside to serve a greater purpose, is that in doing so, we gain purpose and meaning... we gain life... in greater fullness than we could have asked or imagined. This is what Wilberforce lived in a rather remarkable way. He expressed it himself as he wrapped up that first major speech, declaring: “A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might - let the consequences be what they would, I am from this time determined that I will never rest till I have effected its abolition.”

The point of this whole exploration of various aspects of Anglican tradition is for us to know more about who we are as a result of our history. But it doesn’t stop there. While I recognize the importance of knowledge and understanding for its own sake, the greater purpose in all this is for us to have a greater appreciation of the riches of our tradition, so that we can bring them to the needs of the world, in a personal way, even if it costs us. Just one of the many reasons I think so many initiatives to reach out to younger people have not worked is because they have too often been done at arms length and out of fear, anxiety or self-interest. We need new volunteer help to keep our institution running. We want new envelope givers or more bums in seats. But these underlying motivations make all the difference. Instead of self-interest, we must shift to be look beyond ourselves and our own needs or desires, to the need of the world - those around us - and the mission of God in the world God loves.

I’m convinced that when we reach out with vulnerability and conviction, with a message of life and love and grace, those of any age will respond. There are so many, too many, people who are dying in their slavery to consumerism, to a need for control, and to the impossible pressures and expectations of the world for perfect bodies, unlimited energy, and unrelenting

busy-ness. How can we offer God's amazing grace to the wretched in our community? The beginning place is to know ourselves as wretched and yet forgiven, mistaken and yet loved, dying and yet saved. Confession and repentance are key steps in the path to fullness of life.

Following Wilberforce's speech of 1789, an important thing happened: he lost the vote that followed 163 to 88. It then took almost 20 years and many, many more speeches before his motion finally won the day. It must have felt, at least sometimes, like a lot of failure. But those 20 years weren't full of failure. Each speech and every lost vote was one more step towards success - one more step towards fulfilling the mission of God to which Wilberforce had committed himself. Likewise, every effort we make, every risk we take, every time we seem to fail in our attempts to share the riches of our God-given faith and tradition with someone new, we take one more step towards fulfilling our part in God's mission to the world God loves.

Wilberforce remained true to his declaration to dedicate his life to fighting for freedom for people he didn't know and for the soul of his own country. A bill forbidding the slave trade finally passed in the British parliament on February 23, 1807. It then took another 25 years to pass a bill granting the full emancipation of slaves throughout the British Empire. The Slavery Abolition Act was passed on July 26, 1833 and a mere 3 days later, on July 29, Wilberforce died. Following his death, one British Lord commented: "The wonder is that a short period in the short life of one man is, well and wisely directed, sufficient to remedy the miseries of millions for ages."

May we too strive to live with the boldness and conviction with which Wilberforce changed the world. And in doing so, may we claim the promise and know the hope that in serving a greater mission, we gain purpose and meaning...we gain life... in greater fullness than we could have asked or imagined.