

William Wilberforce

9.9.07

From the introduction to a book that was my main holiday read this summer:

When four o'clock in the morning came the Members were still there in force, and in voting 283 for the *Ayes* and only sixteen for the *Noes* they would render the close or negative votes of earlier years hard to believe. Yet before they did so, speaker after speaker would single out one of their number as the architect of the victory to come; one who had found twenty years before that the trade was 'so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable' that he had 'from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition'; one whose speech against the trade in 1789 was, according to the great Edmund Burke, 'not excelled by anything to be met with in Demosthenes?' and one who through all the dark years of war and revolution since then had persisted in the face of heavy defeats, gnawing and nagging his way to an objective he believed had been set before him by God.

Sir John Doyle referred to 'the unwearied industry' of this man, and 'his indefatigable zeal ... which washed out this foul stain from the pure ermine of the national character'. Lord Mahon said his 'name will descend to the latest posterity, with never fading honour', and Mr Walter Fawkes said he looked 'with reverence and respect' to a man who has 'raised a monument to his fame, founded on the basis of universal benevolence'. As the debate approached its climax, it was Sir Samuel Romilly, the Attorney General, who compared the same individual with the tyrant Napoleon across the Channel. The Emperor might seem 'when he sat upon his throne to have reached the summit of human ambition and the pinnacle of earthly happiness', but in his bed 'his solitude must be tortured and his repose banished by the recollection of the blood he had spilled and the oppressions he had committed'. By contrast, a certain Member of the House of Commons would that night 'retire into the bosom of his happy and delighted family' and lie down on his bed 'reflecting on the innumerable voices that would be raised in every quarter of the world to bless him; how much more pure and permanent felicity must he enjoy, in the consciousness of having preserved so many millions of his fellow creatures, than the man with whom he had compared him, on the thrones of which he had waded through slaughter and oppression'. As Romilly closed, he was followed by an almost unheard-of event: the House of Commons rose as a body, cheering to the echo a man whom many of them had once ignored, opposed or abused. The object of their adulation found that the scene, as he later wrote, left him 'completely overpowered by my feelings', and the tears streamed down his face. A slight and hunched figure amidst a sea of tributes, he would indeed attain that night one of 'the two great objects' which he had long believed should be the work of his life. To some a 'sacred relic', yet to others the 'epitome of the devil', he was one of the finest debaters in Parliament, even in its greatest age of eloquence. While he never 'held ministerial office, his extraordinary combination of humanity, evangelism, philanthropy and political skill made him one of the most influential Britons in history. For the man saluted by the Common that night, tearful, emotional, but triumphant as the hated slave trade was voted into history, bore the name of William Wilberforce.

[William Hague, *Wilberforce*, pp xvii-xviii]

This year marks the bicentenary of that day – or should I say night. There was a time when everyone associated the name of Wilberforce with the abolition of slavery; until this year I

suspect the most recent generations have been less acquainted with Wilberforce, perhaps for three reasons:

1. The understandable modern desire to see that the real heroes were not white men who walked the corridors of power at the centre of a mighty empire but black men, women and children who were, at it were at the coalface. That is understandable but in the age of cynicism about politics and what can be achieved it seems to me that it is no bad thing to hold in the public mind the memory of those who by doggedly fighting within the system caused changes which transformed the fates of thousands and millions..
2. There is a wider modern cynicism about saints and heroes anyway. It has been said that a saint is just someone who hasn't been properly researched yet. Wilberforce is an example of someone whose reputation many have tried to unpick in recent decades – not warts and all so much as warts are all. The much acclaimed William Hague biography however takes on the critics and is unashamed in regarding its subject as a true hero.
3. There is a particular issue with Wilberforce that his story was told to subsequent generations by two of his sons who played down the role played by others notably Thomas Clarkson. There was some inter-family wrangling behind this which has persisted into our own day. I know a bit of the recent inside story of this because both Wilberforce and Clarkson were St John's men and the college was goaded into action to support a campaign for Clarkson's name to be immortalised alongside Wilberforce's in Westminster Abbey – a campaign masterfully conducted by the good ladies of the Wisbech WI.

But none of that should take away anything from Wilberforce's leading and essential role in a movement that changed the world considerably for the better. I think we can take some pride in the fact that this was a British achievement, but I think we in the church can take perhaps more pride in the fact that this was a Christianly motivated movement.

Wilberforce was brought up in a conventional Cof E home; his mother was pious enough to attend midweek services; his aunt and uncle however were part of a new movement sweeping the church and country; they were Evangelicals fired up with a message of personal salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Following the death of his father, the young William went to live with his aunt and uncle in Wimbledon, but their religious influence was so disturbing to the rest of the family that his mother took him away again. A few years earlier six students had been expelled from St Edmund Hall, Oxford, for holding Evangelical views; Samuel Johnson had commented: 'A cow is a very good animal in a field but we turn her out of a garden'. In other words, Evangelical Christianity was fine for the uncouth masses but polite society had its limits of toleration.

But much to the alarm of the couth, Evangelical conversion was happening to an increasing number of the up-and-coming movers and shakers in society. Wilberforce's own journey to conversion was aided by the company of leading intellectuals and people in society who were making the same journey – partly a reaction against the moral torpitude of late 18th century and Regency England. That journey took him through several months of inner darkness and despair before a wholehearted acceptance of Christ as his personal Saviour and a dedication to follow him with every fibre of his being. He then searched for how best to serve Christ and resolved that one of his lifelong aims would be the abolition of slavery. How he achieved this owes a good deal to the kind of person he was and the influence he was

therefore able to wield. Here are three things that I think are an important part of his personal chemistry that we can learn from: humility, hospitality and humour.

First, humility. Though he was born into money and a place in society, though he seemed publicly at ease with himself and self-assured, in fact within he felt a deep sense of his own failings and weaknesses. To a visitor he once said ‘popularity is certainly a dangerous thing – the antidote is chiefly the feeling one has; how differently they would regard me, if they knew me really.’ He wrote, ‘No man on earth has a stronger sense of sinfulness and unworthiness before God than I’.

That humility worked out into his politics by his carefulness in not putting other people down, in listening respectfully to people’s opinions and concerns. While in imitation of his Lord he saw himself anointed to a task – ‘the Spirit of the Lord is upon me..’ in pursuing it he was also Christlike and also Paul-like in proclaiming his cause. Paul in our first reading –as elsewhere – renounces the possibility of hectoring his audience – in this case the slave-owner Philemon – and instead appeals to his better nature, not bullying or humiliating people into following a way, but gracefully wooing them, drawing them by awakening them to their own conscience and Christian spirit. A friend of his wrote this: [*Wilberforce*, p200]. Humility.

Secondly, hospitality. His home was always full of visitors eager to benefit from his wisdom and agile mind. Someone said that his home was like ‘Noah’s Ark, full of beasts clean and unclean.’ The table, often the breakfast table, was the place for the exchange of opinions, the forming of strategies and the making of many friends. He was no dull puritan either – in his early Christian days he was conscience-stricken by the very lengthy drunken dinners he used to go to, not least with his good friend the PM William Pitt. So he decided on a lifelong rule that he would limit himself on such occasions to just six glasses of wine.

His humour comes as a surprise to modern commentators who assume that because he was pious he must have been rather dull. But he was sought out by all the leading thinkers, wits and raconteurs. A leading European writer and hostess said, ‘Mr Wilberforce is the best converser I have met with in this country. I have always heard he is the most religious, but I now find that he is the wittiest man in England.’

Humility, hospitality and humour. Armed with these Wilberforce was able to woo the Philemons of his generation, to whisper into the national conscience and gradually to change the way people saw the world.

What equipped him for the task was a combination of his own personal chemistry and his determination to follow in the footsteps of the Christ who came to set the oppressed free. In turn Wilberforce became an inspiration to others. Abraham Lincoln once said that ‘everyone should know Wilberforce.’ I am inclined to agree.