

Trinity 6 – Vassa Day

I had an email from the archdeacon the other week. 'I am sorry to inform you', it said, 'that St Andrew's is on a list of churches that contain memorials connected to the slave trade.' I think he thought that we must have a statue to someone like Edward Colston, the civic bigwig whose effigy recently ended up in the Bristol Channel because of his associations with the transatlantic slave trade. I was able to smile and send back a reassuring message that there will be no iconoclasm in Chesterton in the near future. Thankfully our connection with the slave trade puts us on the right side of history. Our monument is (of course) the one where Aidan and Conrad laid a white wreath earlier in the service, the one in memory of the four year old Anna Maria Vassa, the daughter of the African anti-slavery campaigner Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano.

The church isn't the only institution to respond to the appalling death of George Floyd at the hands of – or rather, under the knee of – a Minneapolis police officer. Many institutions have been reviewing their memorials and histories to check that they are not the next to be called out. My old college – Caius – has agreed to remove a window honouring a pioneer in eugenics. St John's however – where I was chaplain many moons ago – has been thankful to cherish the money of two of its alumnae who were instrumental in the abolition of the slave trade, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson.

Wilberforce was a parliamentarian and was responsible for pushing the legislation through a sluggish and reluctant House of Commons. His passion for the cause was an outworking of his evangelical Christian convictions; he was part of that new wave of spiritual seriousness and energy that swept through the nation in the wake of John Wesley's preaching. Its central emphases were the importance of personal faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour, of inner conversion and experience of the renewing Holy Spirit and of putting the faith of the Bible before church traditions. But there was a problem – there were many who claimed the same faith in Scripture as Wilberforce who defended slavery because it was not directly forbidden in the Bible. Indeed we often miss the fact that it is constantly there in the background – such as in our gospel reading. I bet you didn't even notice. I didn't until I thought about it. 'And the slaves of the household came and said to him, 'Master...'

What Wilberforce and others argued was that if you are looking for a proof text that the Bible is against slavery you are using the Bible in the wrong way. What they saw was that the whole spirit and tenor of the Bible was pointing in another direction. 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.' The destiny God has called us to is to be given complete freedom, slaves to no-one, inheritors of the earth. In the household of God there are no slaves; there is one Father and we are his children and his heirs – everything is or will be ours.

That is a future reality which is breaking into the present. That means it's important that we give equal honour to all races and colours, all tribes and nations – and in our history it means we need to widen those we remember and memorialise.

That's why Olaudah Equiano is now honoured alongside William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. Wilberforce won the political battles, but he was dependent on Clarkson to do the research and put together the evidence. But actually what changed things was the mood of the nation, popular feeling that was moved by encountering in the flesh those who had been slaves and who demonstrated that in their freedom they were as worthy of respect, dignity and love as anyone else.

Wilberforce changed the law because Clarkson gave him the facts and the evidence, but it was Equiano amongst others who toured the country, told his story and won people's hearts. He was not just a statistic but a brother.

I think that's why Anna Maria made such an Impression in Chesterton. The acting Master of St John's College sent me an email a few weeks ago asking why we have this memorial. Why is Anna Maria buried here in Chesterton?

My guess - and I don't have conclusive proof of this – but my guess is that she was taken in by the family of Robert Robinson, who was the pioneering minister of what is now St Andrew's St Baptist Church and who lived at what is now called Roebuck House in old Chesterton. Robinson was part of a circle of liberal thinkers in Cambridge that were committed to the abolition of the slave trade and who supported Equiano in his speaking tours and publishing.

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These four graves at the east end of the church are those of the Robinson family. In those days everyone was buried in the parish churchyard whether you were of the Established Church or a non-Conformist. Many children sadly died in infancy; their names are recorded in our burial register. But none of them have memorials. I suspect that Anna Maria was taken in by Robinson's daughter Ellen and her husband William Curtis. They have six infant children buried in the churchyard; none have memorials. The vicar at the time, William Lort Mansel, has three children buried at St Andrew's but no memorial. And yet this four year old newcomer, only recently taken in by the parish because she was an orphan, has perhaps the finest memorial in the churchyard. What was it that made her death so significant, so remembered?

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*To bury her the village children came.
And dropp'd choice flowers, and lisp'd her early fame;
And some that lov'd her most, as if unblest,
Bedew'd with tears the white wreath on their breast;*

And lisp'd her early fame – she was famous, everybody knew her story. And they not only knew about her and knew her – it says they lov'd her. Within six months the family that took was burying their own daughter but there is no memorial for her.

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This girl had captured the imagination and hearts of this community - this city: the memorial comes I suspect from the efforts of those wider than what was this village. And then her story – and that of her father – was largely forgotten until a revived interest in Black history has come in our generation. I'm so glad we have this memorial and that the archdeacon's email the other week was not one to bring shame or embarrassment. This story and this memory is a reminder that God has called from every clime those to be his children, not subject to the spirit of slavery but who are called to be joint heirs with Christ.

*She is gone and dwells in that abode,
Where some of every clime shall joy in God.*