

# GUEST EDITORIAL

## BELIEVING, BELONGING, BEHAVING

DAVID ISHERWOOD



**CANON DAVID ISHERWOOD** is Rector of Holy Trinity Clapham. Holy Trinity is best known as the church where the Clapham Sect worshipped. This group of evangelical Christians lived in Clapham in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and fought tirelessly for religious and humanitarian causes, notably the abolition of the slave trade.

**IF THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY IS TO HELP US NOT TO RELEGATE OUR PAST TO OBLIVION BUT TO MAKE IT WORK FOR US – LEAVING ITS MARK, HEALING AND MENDING US, MAKING BROKEN BONES REJOICE – THEN THE CURRENT TASKS AND THE FUTURE LEGACIES OF THE BICENTENARY OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE ACT ARE FAR MORE DAUNTING AND PROBLEMATIC THAN WHEN FIRST I STARTED OUT ON THIS JOURNEY FIVE YEARS AGO.**

A MORI poll commissioned in September last year by Set All Free ([www.setallfree.net](http://www.setallfree.net)) – the project established by Churches Together in England to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act – has added substantial weight to the voices of those who have persistently spoken of a national need to embed the shadowy underbelly of our political, social, spiritual and economic history into the national curriculum, into our worship, into our national commemorations, and they will not be silenced. What is hidden must be brought into the sort of light that cannot be switched off because we are uncomfortable with seeing things differently or as they really are, or because we just don't know how to get underneath the skin of anyone who experiences the reality of the world differently.

So, the forensic evidence from MORI, and the best that we have so far, tells us that 'there is some limited awareness of the significance of 2007 in relation to the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Act and one in ten can name the exact year when the act was abolished ... (but) few people are able to identify prominent abolitionists, indicating that ... there is some way to go to raise awareness and knowledge in this area.' Translating history into contemporary experience poses an even more fundamental problem, for only a third of those polled could make connections between chattel enslavement and contemporary expressions of it, like bonded labour, child labour, decent-based slavery, forced labour exacted by the state, or human trafficking. And therein lies an important issue.

My experiences within Set all Free of sitting uncomfortably in caucuses of men and women who are passionate about exposing history and letting it tell its own story, those encounters tell me that as a white middle-class man I need to exercise the greatest caution possible if even for a minute I begin to connect historic chattel enslavement with its contemporary expressions. You have only to sit for a short while in a meeting of 60 or 70 people who have something to say about slavery to hear the voices of those who protest that being ripped from their roots and kidnapped into an industrialising process in which your forebears are known not by name but as a commodity – 'flesh' – is to

be painfully aware that we are on dangerous ground and that the best response is to keep silence, for a while. The full story of slavery has yet to be told with equanimity, the word has yet to become 'flesh' and to bear within it healing and reconciling grace and truth.

Thanks to the scrupulous detective work of a maiden aunt I know that my grandfather seven generations ago was born in 1772, a distiller who lived in Aldersgate Street in the City of London, died on 12 November 1801 and was buried in St Botolph's churchyard. When Lee Jasper appeared before a Parliamentary Select Committee and was asked what it felt like to be black in the UK, he said something to the effect that the descendants of Caribbean slaves could probably trace their forebears back no more than three or four generations. From my own connected history I am reminded that [geanealogy.com](http://geanealogy.com) and [ancestry.net](http://ancestry.net) are the privilege and amusement of a few.

William Wilberforce's part in the abolition of the slave trade sits at an historically hard and uncomfortable place and he is beginning to be restored to the place he deserves in the process. While some are appalled by his gradualist, pragmatic approach to overcoming the scandal of slavery, others praise his persistence and team work. I believe he only ever saw himself as part of a network who could achieve more together than as separate individuals. What is indisputable is that his persistence and courage in the face of overwhelming odds, against the principalities and powers at work in the nation's financial and political closed shops of his day, bear eloquent testimony to his unstinting courage and persistence. Without recrimination and refusing to point the finger of blame, he numbered himself among those who had wittingly and unwittingly promoted the cause of slavery through the parliamentary process. In his own crippled body he bore the cost of the long political haul and the eventual abolition of slavery in 1833.

Wilberforce saw quite clearly the issues of recompense for the shredding of Africa's human resources in a question he posed, 'If we stop trading in flesh what *do* we trade in?' Behind that question was a desire to explore the possibilities of building political and economic structures that would allow Africa to trade on even terms with the rest of the world and to redistribute the weight of profit and loss fairly. In our day much direct and indirect slavery is the result of national and international poverty built on unfair tariffs and treaties. Salvation has consequences that cash out here and now.

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► So how do we live the kingdom promise of a new creation? The bicentenary has given me a very convenient if difficult and sometimes out-of-reach hook on which to hang the practice of being the sort of Church that fully and generously reflects the reign of God. An eschatology that enables us to look back from the future as well as towards it will help us shape our churches as God's communities in which the membranes between now and then will become more transparent. When he was the Bishop of Southwark, Roy Williamson posed the question that will come home to haunt the bicentenary unless we work harder at the answers, 'How then do we live with one another?' By more of the same – honesty and openness and a love that not only bears one another's burdens but which enables us to stare each other in the eye and gaze on one another's scars without fear or shame.

Sonia Barron, William Hague, Grant Macaskill, Carrie Pemberton, Carl Sanders and Sarah Williams have written much here that will challenge and change the ways in which we believe, belong and behave within that marvellous and extraordinary ragbag which is God's Church, which is the hope of the world as it is and is to come. ■