

Setting all Free: is an apology enough?

With the *Set All Free* campaign marking the anniversary of the ending of the Slave Trade in 1807 in mind, Tim Woods explores the theological basis for an apology and reparations to those who had suffered as a result of slavery, He then makes some practical suggestions that local churches might adopt.

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On 8 February 2006 the General Synod of the Church of England resolved to apologise for its role and complicity in the transatlantic slave trade. Just nine years after its establishment by Royal Charter, the Church's missionary organisation, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), had received a bequest in the form of the Codrington plantations on the island of Barbados, together with 300 slaves. The proceeds of slave-based sugar production were used to support the society's efforts at education and Christian mission into the early years of the nineteenth century.

In February, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York spoke strongly in support of the need for an apology to be made by the Church at the Synod, and the resolution was an acknowledgment of major errors of judgment and policy by past generations. But the question of possible reparations was ducked. After all, how could the Church begin to find the funds necessary to reimburse the descendants of slave communities for the gross injustice meted out to them two centuries ago?

Yet it is not so easy to avoid the matter of reparations. In September 2005, Churches Together in England launched a project to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in March 2007, drawing together a coalition of organisations keen to contribute in various ways to the anniversary. At a planning meeting that involved representatives of many coalition members in November 2005, Anthony Reddie from Queen's Foundation, Birmingham spoke powerfully of there being a case for reparations on biblical and theological grounds. His perspective was also summarised in the last edition of the printed version of *Rethinking Mission*¹.

It is not my purpose here either to expound or critique Dr. Reddie's presentation, although I believe it is important to note that he rightly insisted that Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus provides the basis for an ethic of reparations. Zacchaeus undertook not only to repay what he had wrongly expropriated, but to give back four times the amount. (*Luke 19.8*) There is a live question facing both a Church and a nation about what an apology means if it is not matched by some attempt to put right what was wrong, and it is a question that has challenged USPG in its capacity as SPG's successor.² In the case of the United Society, it may be said that pioneering work was undertaken in the earliest days of the struggle against apartheid, and that there remain long-standing commitments to supporting churches across both Africa, and the Caribbean and Central America region. That does not excuse what its predecessor, SPG, was responsible for, nor does it exhaust the requirement for reparations, but the Society provides a continuing channel whereby support can be offered directly to areas deeply damaged by the legacy of the slave trade.

But Church and Nation are not USPG, and unlike the SPG of the eighteenth century, it can no longer be said that the Society is the 'Church's missionary arm', both because there is now a range of Anglican mission agencies in Britain, and also because the Society is structurally distinct from the institution of the four Provinces of the Anglican Communion represented within the British Isles. For the Church of England, then, the question remains: how does the February 2006 apology make any difference to those whose history has been shaped by the cruelty and oppression of the slave trade? Does it begin to address the realities on the ground, or is it little more than pious rhetoric?

What has been lost?

In a sense it is inappropriate for me, as a white English priest, to attempt to gauge what has been lost as a result of the slave trade, and I do so hesitantly, and only for the purpose of attempting to encourage further debate about reparations. I want to note, at the outset, that one thing is very clear: we are not simply talking about financial loss, as though it were a matter of reimbursing income foregone by the slaves themselves, and by the families and descendants who had to struggle to stand on their feet in the years after abolition of slavery itself.

A part of the impact of the slave trade has been the struggle against impoverishment in Africa, particularly West Africa. Depopulation undermined local economies and

cultures, destroyed skills and local industry, and crushed the spirits of the people who remained. Today's continuing struggles for economic sustainability have a variety of causes, but for significant parts of Africa, the effects of the slave trade remain a brake on development.

For the West Indies and parts of Latin America, employment became a major problem after emancipation, and it became hard to achieve economic stability. Dependence on exports to North America and Europe has continued, and this has been reflected culturally in the domination of American media and values.

Following the Second World War, colonial powers in Europe began to experience a labour shortage and turned to their dependencies in the Caribbean for help. In Britain, immigrants suffered poor housing and discrimination, and their families have continued to suffer from racist abuse and assumptions to the present day. As time went on, Black people began to experience increasing difficulty finding employment, and a greater likelihood of being stopped and searched, and arrested by the police than their white counterparts.

Enslavement has been not just an event in time, but a process whereby whole communities have been deprived of a clear sense of their identity. The trauma of slavery has passed on from generation to generation, just as the effects of depopulation in West Africa continue to blight today's society and economy. The transatlantic slave trade effectively dehumanised between nine and twelve million people in the 400 years to 1850, and it is not in the least surprising that in the twenty-first century its effects still reverberate on both sides of the ocean.

Part of the enduring impact of racism has been the way in which blackness came to be associated with inferiority and evil, while at the same time, whiteness was linked with aesthetics, taste and value. Slaves were robbed of a sense of their own African culture, and left with no more than the memory of some musical expression as the remaining link to their past. ³

It is impossible to put a financial figure on what has been lost. For all that the slave trade was about economic gain for European merchants, its legacy is not only an economic one, but a catalogue of personal, social and cultural consequences. Perhaps most significant of all has been the way in which the dehumanisation of the slaves themselves has generated a legacy of lost identity for subsequent

generations. And it was that sense of lost identity that created some of the most passionate contributions towards the end of the November *Set All Free* planning meeting, so passionate in fact that a number of us white representatives found ourselves effectively silenced. How can Church and Nation make reparations for that loss?

The reflections that follow represent an attempt to engage a theology of God as Trinity with the particular crisis of lost identity, as a way of tackling the reparations question from a fresh angle. They are not intended as any comment on the case for financial reparations.

Trinity and Society: Some Recent Anglican Thinking

Trinitarian doctrine has been a central part of the Christian heritage over the centuries, and has its roots within the New Testament. The process of formulation which led to the definitions agreed at the Council of Chalcedon involved doing battle with those whose conceptualisation of God was unitarian or modalist, but many of the questions about the character and nature of the Trinity have remained a subject for debate in the centuries that have followed.

Perhaps the most significant Anglican work to appear on the Trinity in recent decades was the series of Croall lectures given by Leonard Hodgson in Edinburgh in 1943.⁴ Its significance lies in its being a milestone in the shift away from classical doctrine based on Augustine towards a grappling with the subject from the point of view of contemporary thought. Hodgson maintains that Christian doctrine was formulated by reflection on God's work in the world, and that an understanding of the unity of God must accord with revelation, and hold together in the light of both reason and contemporary experience. Uncomprehending awe is not historical Christianity.⁵

It is the observable activity of God in history that forms the starting point for Hodgson's interpretation of Trinitarian doctrine. The earthly life of Jesus and all that has sprung from that constitutes the empirical evidence for the Trinity, and enquiry into the historical records must be matched by a philosophical and theological attempt to comprehend the God who acts in this way. Hodgson noted that the revelation of God in history constituted a recognition that Christians had three kinds of experience of God.

The unity that Hodgson describes in relation to God is not an arithmetic but an organic unity. We are called to faith in ‘...a dynamic unity actively unifying in the one Divine life the lives of the three Divine persons. It is a mystery, but not an irrational mystery.’⁶ For Hodgson, the relation between the Persons is of the essence of God.

Forty years later, David Brown insisted that the development of a rationally coherent doctrine means asking not how the One could be Three (as Augustine attempted to do) but how the Three could be One (as the Cappadocian Fathers did).⁷ The relationship between the Persons is one of harmony and perfect co-operation, and it is the relationship that makes them One. In this way, the Persons of the Godhead are understood as integrated by *perichoresis*, which describes the communion between them.

The identity of each of the Persons of the Trinity is shaped by the relationship with the other Persons, just as it would be true to say that we human persons are who we are because of the relationships that have framed and influenced our lives. The Father is described as the Father by Jesus the Son, and the Spirit is identified as the One who proceeds from the Father. (*John 14.16*) It is the relationship of loving communion that preserves and maintains the integrity of each of the Persons, and similarly our own human identity and integrity is preserved and maintained by loving relationship.

Reparations and the Search for Identity

From a Christian perspective, the critical damage to the identity and integrity of the descendants of people driven into slavery must be addressed. The dehumanising effects of slavery itself are still echoed in the racist assumptions and discrimination of the twenty-first century. For an apology to have substance, the possibility of reparations must be considered; in the case of lost identity, the question facing the Church is how to help restore the integrity and dignity of today’s generations.

At the most basic level, it is essential that the Church should reflect on the ways in which so many of the immigrants to Britain were treated in the 1950s and 1960s when they first attempted to join local congregations for worship. All too often, newcomers were told that ‘they would be more comfortable worshipping somewhere else’, presumably on the basis that black skin would make it hard for them to integrate with local people. Instead of celebrating the gifts that members of an

arriving community would bring, the Church too often drove them out, confirming for them that at some level they were of lesser value or significance than the settled white community.

After such an appallingly bad start, the question remains as to how to recognise and celebrate Afro-Caribbean identity in the Church. A great many of those who were turned away in those early days have since found their way into new and distinctive denominations, created so as to provide a home for faithful Christian people whose original mother Church – often the Church of England – would not welcome them. And so a range of Black Majority churches came into being, whose history is not recognised by the Church of England for as long as they are regarded just as another set of free churches. One step towards a celebration of identity would be a request on the part of the Church of England to be able to enter into full communion with those whom we have rejected. What would it actually take for an approach to be made, in repentance, to the leaders of Black Majority churches to look at restoring a relationship between our Christian communities?

Within the Church of England itself, where there remain monuments and memorials to former slavers and merchant venturers, could there be a way of recognising the deaths of so many thousands of slaves as a result of the ghastly trade? Is it not appropriate for each cathedral or church supported in the past by donations from slave owners to dedicate a chapel or a memorial to the victims, and also in celebration of the gifts of their descendants today? Such initiatives would need at the outset to be planned and directed by members of the African or Afro-Caribbean communities rather than by the white-led Church, but it would be the Church that took full responsibility for providing what was requested.

In the life of the Church, and indeed of the nation as a whole, it is important that we move away from the attitude that people of any ethnic minority background should fit in with the indigenous white community as regards conforming to the local culture and expectations. The integrity of any ethnic group will depend upon the majority community accepting and celebrating the distinctiveness of the minority; it is not enough to tolerate their presence, which seems to be what happens in some communities. To address lost identity, recognition and appreciation of the equal value and contribution of the community will be essential. The Church will change in character as it positively embraces the distinctiveness of the Afro-Caribbean community, not because anything of the English heritage is watered down, but

because Black insights and experience are built in. It will be a more wholesome church that recognises the cultural and political tensions that have existed between the various communities that provide its members, and leads them to a new and joyful mutuality.

A core theme for USPG as a mission agency with a particular history must be the celebration of the diversity of its partner churches across the world. The loss of identity that remains a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade can only be addressed by recognising that the story of appalling suffering and cruelty is a part of the not-so-distant history of the western Church, and that the descendants of the victims are still crying out to be recognised. Africa and the Caribbean region deserve far more and far better than they received in the late twentieth century; the cry for justice and an end to discrimination has yet to be heard. A first step must be the restoration of the identity and integrity of so many wronged communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Footnotes

¹ Anthony Reddie, 'Reconciliation in Christian Theology – A Radical Alternative' in *Rethinking Mission* London: USPG 2005 Vol.3 no.4 p.4f

² An apology was made at USPG's Tercentenary service at St. Paul's Cathedral in 2001. However, it is often forgotten that the Universities Mission to Central Africa was the other major society that merged with SPG to create USPG in January 1965, and that UMCA had been vigorously opposed to slavery from its inception.

³ Much of the foregoing summary has been based on notes included in the *Set all free* publication *Setting the Scene for 2007*, published by Churches Together in England July 2005, pages 6-7

⁴ Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, London: Nisbet 1943

⁵ *ibid* p.59

⁶ *ibid.* p.95

⁷ David Brown *The Divine Trinity* London: Duckworth 1985