

St Patrick

So what is special about today? Any ideas?

Today is Saint Patrick's Day. It's an easy date for me to remember as March 17th is my parents' wedding anniversary. My dad, however, says it would've been much better to get married the week after Saint Patrick's day, that way he would have a reminder in good time to buy flowers and a card for my mum.

There are many legends about St Patrick but I confess that in my youth I mostly associated him with the craic, that is a bit of a party, and I spent many hazy St Paddy's days drinking guinness and dancing to Irish bands in the pubs of Portobello and along the Kilburn Highroad.

Today, in more sober reflection, I see much in St Patrick to be admired. He was a humble man, courageous, resilient and faithful.

Born in the 4th Century to a wealthy a Romano-British family, Patrick's life took an unexpected turn, when, as a teenager, he was captured by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. Patrick's cruel master put him to work as a herdsman, feeding him little and housing him poorly. Before captivity Patrick's faith was not strong but in the face of adversity he began to pray fervently and became devout. Six years later, prompted by an angelic vision, Patrick escaped back to Britain where he devoted himself to the service of God. After many years in France he returned once more to Ireland, and there he set about freeing the pagan Irish from their heathen ways by bringing them to faith in Christ Jesus.

Todays readings

In our reading from Philippians we hear of those who live as enemies of the cross of Jesus, and it was men such as these that enslaved Patrick, and sold him in the market

place, just as they would cattle, timber or grain. Yet however much they sort to degrade him, Patrick remained faithful to the Lord, even returning to the place of his captivity to free those in bondage to earthly things, gathering them together just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and saying “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”.

Luke 13.31-35

Modern slavery

Shockingly the traumatic events of St Patrick’s teens have once again become common place. Modern slavery is a scourge of our times. And it is not just a curse in urban neighbourhoods, it has taken root in the countryside too. There are an estimated 136,000 victims in the UK. I don’t know about you but I find that deeply shocking, I don’t want to believe it, but sadly it is true. As a child I was horrified when I first read about the slave trade but took comfort in it being a ghost of times past. How I now wish it were so.

Clewer Sisters

As you may know, I attended Cuddesdon Theological college before starting my curacy here. One of the things that makes Cuddesdon special, is that for the last seven years a community of women religious have lived alongside the ordinands.

The Community of St John Baptist was founded in 1852 in the parish of Clewer near Windsor. The sister’s mission was to help marginalised young women at risk of being drawn into prostitution by housing them and teaching them a trade. By 1901 the community had 300 sisters and 45 branch houses. However vocations dropped sharply through the 1900s, and the last of the sisters relocated to Rippon College Cuddesdon in 2012.

When I arrived at there in 2014 only four sisters remained, but their faithful presence in college life had a powerful influence on the student body. Their depleted numbers

and advancing years had not lessened their determination to serve the Lord, and they remained committed to the spirit of their original mission.

During my final year at Cuddesdon I led the college Social Justice Group, and chose as our joint focus Modern Slavery and the Refugee Crisis. Sister Anne, then in her mid 70s, attended regularly. She told us of the terrible things she had learnt of through her visits to women held at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. Many of those she spoke too had been trafficked into the UK, and then forced into prostitution against their will.

Things have moved on since I left Cuddesdon and the sisters have chosen to live out their rule by generously funding The Clewer Initiative, the flagship project underpinning the Church of England's commitment to eradicating modern slavery in the UK today.

Our own diocese is on board and on 21st May at St Georges Church, Tiverton, an event has been scheduled called Exeter: Hidden Voices, which aims to show local churches how to work together to bring an end to the horror of modern slavery.

So why do Christians need to get involved and what does the bible have to tell us about slavery?

Well right at the beginning, in Genesis, we learn we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26-27), all of us, whatever our beliefs, our ethnic backgrounds, colour, economic status, gender or sexual orientation. And in the aftermath of the sickening white supremacist terror attack on peaceful muslims at prayer in Christchurch this week, it is so important to affirm this.

Make no mistake, to treat others as less than fully human, by enslavement or slaughter is an offence against the Imago Dei and therefore against God.

Jesus never preaches hate and blessed is his name.

All forms of slavery are an attack on divinely bestowed human dignity, and harmful to mind and body. In the New Testament Jesus makes it plain that we are not to exploit human beings as property, or to treat them like objects or commodities, but instead we are to love our neighbours as ourselves (Mark 12.31). To subject another human being to slavery, servitude, poverty, inequality, oppression or fear for our own ends, is an act against God's will. The Kingdom where our Lord reigns is a Kingdom of Justice and Peace.

In the gospel of Luke, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus reads from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4.18-19)

If as Christians we are to truly follow Jesus and participate in God's mission of love to the world, we must not only applaud this vision but actively work for it.

St Patrick was sold by 4th century people traffickers into forced labour as a herdsman. Yet the book of Isaiah tells us that God holds a very different vision for our lives, and shows that labour exploitation is contrary to God's intention for the world. We are each and every one of us to receive the fruits of our own labour.

They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, not bear children for calamity' (Isaiah 65. 21-13)

Sadly as we now know slavery can no longer be considered something from a bygone age, stamped out by gentlemen campaigners in frock coats.

In 2017 there were 40 cases of modern slavery reported in Devon and Cornwall. Nineteen of those victims were under 18-years of age, that is roughly the same number of young people we have in our junior choir. Just let that sink in, it is an appalling thought.

Sometimes, if we are short of cash, the offer of a job done on the cheap can be very tempting, but if a price seems too good to be true it probably is.

When in 2017 a number of Hand Car Wash sites in Exeter were closed down under the Modern Slavery Act, Detective Sergeant Roger Hocking, from the Serious and Organised Crime Team said that the victims were "hidden in plain sight." All too often cheap labour comes at a high human cost.

Make no mistake, slavery is a sin and it has taken root again in our land.

So how can we as Christians help.

Well we can educate ourselves, go along to the event at St Georges in May, visit The Clewer Initiative website or ask friend to download some of their resources for you. Secondly take the charge to be good neighbours seriously. Enslaved people may be isolated but that does not mean they are out of sight, it's often that we just don't recognise them. When we learn to spot the tell-tale signs of modern slavery in our community, we can report our concerns and give people the chance of freedom.

Thirdly, if the price you are quoted to tarmac your drive or paint your nails is too good to be true, do your homework, is the firm or nail bar reputable?

And finally we can pray alone and together, that all God's children may be free so that, as it says in the Lord's prayer, God's will shall be established 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

Let us pray:

Lord of creation, we thank you for all who are working to combat modern slavery: for governments and agencies, for Church and other faith leaders, for charities and individuals. Help us to be part of love's movement, to work for a world where human beings are valued, free to come and go, where no one is enslaved, and no one used against their will for another's pleasure or need.

Amen

Resources

<https://www.theclewerinitiative.org>

<http://www.medaille-trust.org.uk>

<https://www.antislavery.org>