

Should There be an Apology for our Involvement in Slavery?

In the first paragraph of a recent statement, made by Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, at a Synod meeting on the subject of the necessity for the Church of England to apologize for its involvement in slavery, he mentions there are those, who say there is no need for an apology, because we are responsible for our actions - not those of our ancestors, who are long dead - and we live in the present - not the past. He also stated that those, who oppose the notion of an apology, also see it as being just a form of words to satisfy the conscience or the current trend towards political correctness, and involves no cost to the individual who apologizes.

The Archbishop, however, contends that an apology is both necessary and costly. He speaks of the Christian community as the Body of Christ, sharing both the joy and shame.

Those of us who call ourselves Christian need to focus on what differentiates Christianity from all other religions. In the Bible, the Body of Christ is the community of believers in the risen Lord Jesus and they are seen as the Bride, pure and spotless, adorned and made ready for her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The Bride has been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb of God, sacrificed on the cross at Calvary in atonement for her sins.

There is no other religion which speaks of God Himself, coming in the likeness of man, to rescue him from spiritual darkness of sin and death. "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The Word was God. There was nothing made that was not made by Him. In him we see light, and that light was the life of man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully Man. He said: "I came not to be served, but to serve and give My life as a ransom for many." He paid the full price for our release from the slavery of sin. Now that he has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, we serve Him, as we carry out His mandate to proclaim that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself - we as the redeemed Body of Christ.

Let us not forget those who have gone before - whose lives reflected God's unconditional love in Christ for a hurting, sinful world. In the book of Hebrews the writer alludes to a race, where we are the competitors, and just before we start the race, we are aware of a "great cloud of witnesses", the company of all the faithful, urging us on to the finishing line, as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Too often we forget that we are sinners. We are blind to the darkness within us which has been masked by the pride we exhibit to those around us in our accomplishments and achievements and "good works", as though these could outweigh the wrongs we know that we have committed in thought, word and

deed. Most of us also have little idea of the real state of our sin in comparison to the holiness of God Almighty. If we did, we would understand more about the mystery of grace and mercy, triumphing over judgment at the cross for those who truly repented of their sin and knew the complete forgiveness, which is only possible on the basis of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

As the Body of Christ, we need to face up to our responsibilities one to another. Our history has formed us in terms of background, culture, class and race, as we have interrelated to each other within the legacy, handed down to us from past generations. We can choose to avoid the fact that the shame and sinfulness of our predecessors still have their effect in our communities today. How, then, can we explain that there still exists racism and discrimination in our so-called tolerant society with its democratic values? If we do not acknowledge the failure that is a part of us and not just of some distant "them", as the Archbishop states, then we are choosing to maintain the wall of hostility which has always existed between those who have been wronged and the perpetrators of those wrongs. It is no good judging others, in terms of whether their wrongs are merely perceived to be those with "a victim mentality", until we have walked in their shoes, and have some idea of their experience of life from their perspective.

If we are serious about racial and communal harmony, then we need to face up to the inequalities, which still exist today because of the historical legacy of slavery. Such a legacy imprisons people and keeps them "unhealed". It makes them frustrated and angry, or bitter in their prejudice. I believe that we have a God-given duty, especially with the well-being of subsequent generations in mind, to tackle the issues, underlying international, interethnic and interfaith tensions. I believe that we, as Christians, have a unique role to play in this conciliatory process, because the source of all healing is Christ Himself. I make no apology for declaring the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, though that might sound ironic in the context of what is being discussed. As the Archbishop finally states, we have a "responsibility to preach the Good News, as we not just look back in awkwardness and embarrassment but speak of the freedom that we are given to face ourselves, including the unacceptable regions of ourselves and our history".

The Christian - i.e. the follower and disciple of Jesus Christ - is one who is unafraid to stand up for righteousness, justice and truth, however painful and costly that may be for him personally. Either Jesus is Lord of every part of his life or He is not! The Christian is told to speak the truth in love - is told, in fact, that he will be given the right words to say, if He seeks God's help. I have come to the conclusion that I must be obedient to what the Lord has placed on my heart. Although, as I have already stated, I am not personally responsible for my ancestors' actions - whether good or bad - nor are the present generation, nevertheless I make the choice of repenting on their behalf for their involvement in enslaving their fellow human beings, made in the image of

God, in Whom my forefathers professed faith. History is made by the rulers, who exercise their power either as tyrants or benevolent patriarchs. Those who are the ruled are not given the option of having a past. Africans, who arrived on American soil, were transformed into units of production in order to serve masters who accumulate wealth and become self-proclaimed "aristocrats" in ways which, despite the "Christian" ethos of society, were by no means subject to moral scruples nor even according to the will of God. In fact, those who approved of the institution of slavery invented their own system of beliefs, based on a misinterpretation of Scripture. In the Bible, the year of the Jubilee is particularly significant, because it represents the time of release of ALL slaves and restitution of ALL debts, including land. Slavery in the Deep South of the United States was "for ever". Slaves could buy themselves out at exorbitant cost, but on the whole, present and future generations of families were in permanent servitude at the whim of their masters and according to the draconian laws of the state.

We, as descendants of slave-owners and slaves, should look back to the dark periods of our collective history with honesty and a desire to seek out the truth, however uncomfortable the "ride" may be for us. I use the word, "collective" advisedly. To begin with, we ought to realize that our family histories will be "running in parallel lines", touching at specific points, but they will only slowly become our collective story, as we seek to understand each other, even in the pain of grief for past wrongs.

We, as Christians, are ambassadors, representing the King in our lives, to show His unconditional love towards those whom He has created in His image, and who are in need of a Saviour, and to proclaim the message of healing and reconciliation for all to their God through Jesus Christ. Our very lives MUST reflect the message which He brings through us. If they do not, we are being hypocrites, deserving the contempt of mankind as well as the judgment of God Almighty. However, it is His will that we suffer for the sake of the gospel, in order for us to be prepared as humble vessels for the new wine of peace, hope and love to be poured out to those around us who are in desperate need, whether they are aware of this or not.

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