

Slaves to the Past & Architects of the Future

By the time you read this, we will almost a 12th of the way through 2022 but at the time of writing the new year is still very much upon us. Our thoughts will have been on what the year will bring, whether Covid restrictions will ever let us travel to exotic destinations once more (such as Derbyshire or Blackpool), and how we are going to describe the latest Covid variants when we run out of the Greek alphabet.

Also, in the news at time of writing, is the decision that four people accused of pulling down Edward Colston's statue and dumping it in Bristol harbour are innocent on the grounds that the presence of the statue was a hate crime and it was, therefore, not an offence to remove it. As is the way with these things, there is a range of views on the matter that has sparked a debate on what constitutes criminal damage, what constitutes hate crime, how much we should re-evaluate history and attitudes and who should decide these things. However, as things stand, the verdict (unlike the statue) cannot be toppled.

Edward Colston was a product of his time, where the British Empire was all and the use and abuse of slaves for financial gain was considered perfectly justifiable by many, including, it should be remembered, the established Christian church. Born into a privileged family, he held strong views about order, the monarchy and the stability of society. He was a member of, and profited from, the Royal African Company, established by charter of King Charles II and a trader in African commodities (including slaves). He donated over 5.5 million pounds (by today's standards) to create almshouses, hospitals and schools in Bristol.

We will never know what Edward Colston would have made of our view of him today. Given he was a product of his time, I'm almost tempted to feel sorry for him. Almost, that is, until you consider that during his 12-year involvement, the Royal African Company transported an estimated 84,000 African men to the plantations. These were human beings, separated from their wives and families, and subjected to inhumane conditions. 19,000 of them are believed to have died in transit.

There are no easy answers for how much responsibility it is fair to put on the shoulders of those of us whose standard of living, privileges and lifestyle have been shaped by injustices of the past (and we should not forget that modern day slavery is still with us including in the UK, although at least it is now considered as being unacceptable by most people). Perhaps it would be more useful to consider if there is a modern-day equivalent - an injustice that the future will look back on and be appalled by that we seem oblivious to. Sadly, the answer in my opinion is "yes". In recent years we have started to wake up to the great damage our high standards of living are doing to the world. We are now more aware than ever of the rising average temperature of the planet and the amount waste and pollution we are creating. But I'm not sure yet that we appreciate how future generations will regard us. And just as we look with incredulity and disgust about how slaves were abused and treated in order to create wealth and comfort for others, I fear the future will have similar feelings about the cost of our comfort and standard of living.

So, what hope is there? Well, for a church magazine article, perhaps it's a bit surprising that the one person who hasn't been mentioned is God. The God who created us. The God who created the heavens and the earth and who calls us his children. The God who sent his only Son to die on a cross so that we might be forgiven.

In our denomination, we are used to focusing on the personal forgiveness that Jesus brings us. We are less used to focusing on the wider forgiveness that Jesus brings to our world and our circumstances. A forgiveness to free us not just from our day-to-day wrongdoings but from the sins of the past. And here's the exciting thing; this forgiveness is *not* given to make us feel OK so we can carry on as we are. Rather, it is given to lift the burden of guilt from us so that we can be free. Free to look at ourselves and begin to challenge wrong attitudes and prejudices inside us. Free to speak out when we need to and free to think about changing our own lifestyles and attitudes for the better.

I hope the above has not proved too depressing for you! Here's to a 2022 where we can all look forward to being a bit kinder and, in so doing, make the world a kinder place. Amen.

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