



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Wednesday Eucharist with Prayer for Healing
1st July 2020

2 Corinthians 4:1-10 John 15:9-17

The chickens are coming home to roost. People throughout society and in the church are facing up to the terrible and brutal inheritance of the slave trade, and the ways in so many institutions based their wealth on that despicable business. There must be some form of redemption and restitution – what that will be, time will tell. How it is even possible that those who called themselves Christians could accept the status quo of those times is quite unthinkable. But it is good and important also to remember that influential clergy and members of the Church of England were horrified by it and were leading figures in securing abolition.

Today the Church of England remembers a grandfather, father and son; three generations of priests who had a remarkable influence as social reformers in this country; Henry, John and Henry Venn the younger. Grandfather Henry, himself the son of a priest, was born in 1725 and became curate of Clapham in 1753. It was while serving in this parish that his ministry coincided with the evangelical revival in the Church of England which included John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield.

Clapham became a centre for religious philanthropists, continued under his son John who came to Clapham as Rector in 1792. The Clapham Sect, as it became known, gathered a number of Anglicans together who campaigned against the slave trade, including Wilberforce. John's son Henry the younger was born in Clapham and also became ordained; he continued the anti slavery campaigning until abolition in 1833 and devoted his ministry to the Church Missionary Society. In this role he

put much energy into developing the African church; being the first to coin the phrase 'indigenous church', developing trade in African products and organising training for young Africans in trade development. He was instrumental in securing the appointment of the 1st African Bishop, Samuel A Crowther in 1864. The principles he insisted on in missionary work were that the cross of Christ must be the centre of preaching; that missionaries must master the vernacular language, and that people should have the Scriptures in their own language as early as possible. Rejecting the paternalistic view that Western nations were trustees of the welfare of the rest of the world, Henry Venn insisted on building self respect and self reliance in the young church. He was on guard against tendencies to Westernise young people because this would destroy pride in their own culture. Writing to an African missionary Venn admonished him to 'let all European habits, European tastes, European ideas be left behind you. Let no other change be visible in your tone of mind or behaviour than that of a growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.'

The Venn clergy, and those they worked with in Clapham pursued an unpopular path but one which they as Christians felt constrained to work for. As Paul put in in our first reading, they renounced the shameful things that were part and parcel of their society; they didn't proclaim themselves but proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord, appealing to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. They took seriously Jesus' commandment to love one another as he loved. And they bore fruit that lasted. The international overt slave trade ended; there remains of course the pressing question of hidden slavery and bonded labour. Maybe our world cannot be quite so complacent that we are vastly superior in our treatment of people who make our cheap clothing and work in the hidden parts of our society. But we thank God for all those with the courage of their convictions, whose Christian faith means that they work hard to change things for the better.

To end with a fun fact; what happened to the great grandson at the end of this dynasty? He became a scientist and invented the Venn diagram. A gifted family. Thanks be to God.