

Address to the Diocesan Synod by the Revd. Canon Wim Zwalf, Vicar of St. Peter & St. Paul, Wisbech to the Diocesan Synod at Ely on March 10th 2007.

If you live in Wisbech or the surrounding area, everyone knows the name of Thomas Clarkson. It is his monument, 70 foot high, that stands opposite the Post Office. But who was he and why did they erect such a splendid memorial, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, to this man? Why does Wisbech have a school, an avenue, a pub, sheltered housing and a doctor's surgery all bearing his name? And it is not just in deepest Fen Country that the name is honoured. There are schools and streets throughout the West Indies named in his honour, and in Haiti, in the capital Port-au-Prince there is l'Avenue Clarkson!

This son of the Revd John Clarkson, headmaster of the Wisbech Free Grammar School, and Curate of All Saints, Walsoken, was born in Wisbech in 1760, and baptised in the Parish Church of St. Peter and St. Paul on May 26th. While still a young man of 25 at Cambridge he won first prize for an essay entitled 'is it right to enslave men against their will?' Knowing virtually nothing about slavery, he set about reading all he could on the subject. What he discovered horrified and haunted him day and night. That day in a flash of inspiration he determined to abandon a probable career in the Church. He had already been ordained deacon in Winchester Cathedral, but decided to dedicate his life to 'see these calamities to an end'. He became then and would be for the rest of his days an abolitionist.

From that moment onwards his life was dedicated to that one cause. When Clarkson began his work he had a committee of already dedicated abolitionists composed of nine Quakers and four Anglicans. He became their main writer of works and pamphlets. But what is really staggering is, that between 1787 and 1794, mostly on horseback, he traveled more than 35,000 miles compiling evidence to put before parliament. He compiled lists of over 20,000 names of sailors on slave ships, whom he tried to trace for living and irrefutable evidence of gross abuse and maltreatment of slaves. He detailed first hand accounts of beating and torture administered to slaves. He hung about the insalubrious parts of many of the slaving ports, Bristol and Liverpool in particular, to see for himself the conditions in which drunken young men could be tempted to serve on the slavers. In 1789 he published a stunningly effective diagram of a slave ship, illustrating the space used for 482 male and female slaves. This illustration still graces the pages of most history books, 200 hundred years later, and will appear on the 50 pence stamp which will be issued on 22nd of this month.

On his journeys he set up enthusiastic local committees who raised funds, organised petitions and encouraged the boycott of sugar and other slave-produced goods. Behind this passion for his cause was a deep moral passion, which was fully integrated in his Christian Faith. He argued that slavery was incompatible with Christianity. Not only that, he argued that there was no economic benefit in its favour, that it was contrary to the brotherhood of all mankind, and to the moral accountability of all to their creator. His friend and collaborator William Wilberforce was able with Clarkson's evidence, to persuade Parliament to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. The Bill was passed on 25th march 1807 and 26 years later in 1833 slavery was finally abolished altogether.

On that occasion the Corporation of Wisbech honoured Clarkson with a portrait; in his reply Clarkson wrote: 'That I was the first to take up the Abolition of the Slave-trade is indeed true. But I take no merit to myself on this account, because the path I was to pursue has sprung from a holy source. It is also true that I have laboured 48 years in this noble cause; but no individual could, by himself, have completed so vast a work. What could I myself have done without Mr. Wilberforce, as a parliamentary leader? And what could we have done without the Anti-Slavery Committee founded in 1787. And what could it have achieved without being backed by the British people? And what would the British people have achieved if they had not been lovers of Liberty and Christians. The victory is in fact the triumph of Christianity over barbarism'.

Seven years later when he was already 80 at the massive international Anti- Slavery Convention held in London, attended by 5000 delegates, Clarkson was accorded a silent standing tribute. He said then that his heart burned as fiercely then, though his body would soon decay, as it did at the age of 24, and that if he were to be given another life he would live it and devote it to the same cause.

This self-effacing, diligent, and devout Fen man, now has a memorial in Westminster Abbey: it says: 'a friend to slaves'. The long time of neglect of his name nationally is over and his true worth and

importance is again realised. The name of Clarkson is these days always mentioned in conjunction with Wilberforce, Granville Sharpe and the others who dedicated themselves to this noble cause.

Locally we already commemorate Thomas Clarkson 'a friend to slaves' together with Wilberforce on July 30th and again on September 26th, the anniversary of his death in 1846.

The horror of the Slave trade is unimaginable. There is some dispute about the actual number of people enslaved and transported to the Americas but it is likely to be over a million people. When I lived in Ghana I have myself seen the trading forts, which the British, Dutch, Swedish, Portuguese and French built. Even today they provoke a deep sense of awe and foreboding. They brood on the African coasts as a permanent reminder that the industrial revolution and the prosperity of Europe was built on blood and the lives of the innocent.

All of us are aware of the 20th century holocaust perpetrated on the Jews of Europe. The effect on those who were affected, and I speak as the grandson of Levy Zwalf, who was gassed at Auschwitz on 26th January 1943, as were most of my Dutch relatives, is unimaginable. That particular horror lives on for generations.

Do not for a moment imagine that it is any other for the descendants of slaves today. The terrible injustice done to them deserves the full apology which Rowan our Archbishop will give on 27th March. It is to the shame of our Government that they are not willing to do so on behalf of us all.

Anti Slavery International is still active in our world. Founded by Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce and eight Quakers as the Anti Slavery Society, it still campaigns for those enslaved by bonded labour in many parts of the world. Child labour, under which over 120 million children around the world manufacture goods which we in the developed world buy, still thrives. The trafficking of women and children for sex is something we all know goes on.

Here in our own Diocese there are many migrant workers who are paid well below the minimum wage, especially those whose papers are not wholly in order. Mehdi, a refugee from Iran, who is married to a Latvian girl and is a convert to Christianity from Islam, and who was confirmed by Bishop John two years ago, has no choice but to work for an agency (the respectable word for 'gangmaster') at weekends for £4.20 an hour, where the factory is paying £10 an hour for him to the agency. I have experience in my own parish of Estonian workers paid £3 an hour for repetitive and potentially dangerous work. Alfredo from Portugal, working in a vegetable preparation facility cut the tendon on his right hand. No compensation, no work till it was healed, no state aid - you have to have worked and paid taxes for two years before you are eligible, no money and in danger of being evicted by his English landlord, who already has his properties at a dangerous level of occupation. This too is slavery.

As a nation we need to examine our past, both with pride at what people like Thomas Clarkson achieved, but also with horror at the poverty and deprivation that we left behind in former colonies. And with a determination that we will continue the Christian struggle to abolish all forms of slavery in the modern world.