

BBC

Radio 4

Sunday Worship

from St John's College Chapel, Cambridge

'Set all free'

In the first of a special series commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade Act, The Archbishop of York, the Most Revd and Rt Hon Dr John Sentamu, explores the life and work of two of the great reformers: William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson.

Leader: The Revd Duncan Dormor

Preacher: The Most Revd and Rt Hon Dr John Sentamu

Choir of St John's College, Cambridge

London Adventist Chorale

Music Directors: David Hill & Ken Burton

Organist: Leon Charles

Producer Simon Vivian

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BBC Radio 4. It's Ten past eight. "Set all free!" The Archbishop of York, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Dr John Sentamu is the preacher in the first of our special Sunday Worship services for Lent commemorating the bicentenary of the Act to abolish the Transatlantic slave trade. This morning's service, from St John's College Cambridge, is led by the Dean, the Reverend Duncan Dormer, and begins as the London Adventist Chorale sing the spiritual: Deep River.

~ LONDON ADVENTIST CHORALE:

INTROIT: DEEP RIVER (Trad Spiritual)

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

Good morning and welcome. You join me here, with the London Adventist Chorale and the Choir of St John's College, in this majestic chapel built in 1869 by Gilbert Scott. It's not however the chapel which would have been familiar to two significant members of college. That was demolished in the mid nineteenth century. William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, who played highly

significant parts in the abolition of the British Slave Trade 200 years ago, were members of this College in the late eighteen century.

Our services over the next five weeks of Lent, commemorating the 200th anniversary of the act to abolish the slave trade which passed into law on March 25th, 1807, come from all around the country and as far a field as Ghana.

This morning, on this the first Sunday of Lent, we're going to be calling to mind those who in the past and today suffer exploitation, violence and death as a result of slavery, and all those – past and present - who have worked tirelessly and boldly to challenge and confront such inhumanity and injustice, changing people's hearts and minds for the better.

It may be a coincidence that the anniversary falls this year within Lent but it is, in fact, particularly apt. Lent is a time when we're called to remember and examine the choices we've made as individuals and as communities; to reflect on the brokenness of the world and our own shortcomings, but also on the possibilities of transformation – of sin and sorrow into grace; of suffering into beauty; of alienation into empathy and connection.

~ THE REVD LINDSAY ADAM:

Let us pray.

God the Father,

~ ALL:

Have mercy upon us.

God the Son,

~ ALL:

Have mercy upon us.

God the Holy Spirit,

~ ALL:

Have mercy upon us.

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity,

~ ALL:

Have mercy upon us.

From all evil and mischief;

from pride, vanity and hypocrisy;

from envy, hatred and malice;
and from all evil intent,

~ ALL:

Good Lord, deliver us.

From sloth, worldliness and love of money;
from hardness of heart
and contempt for your word and your laws,

~ ALL:

Good Lord, deliver us.

From sins of body and mind;
from the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil,

~ ALL:

Good Lord, deliver us.

In all times of sorrow;
in all times of joy;
in the hour of death,
and at the day of judgement

~ ALL:

Good Lord, deliver us.

Give us true repentance;
forgive us our sins of negligence and ignorance
and our deliberate sins;
and grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit
to amend our lives according to your holy word.

~ ALL;

**Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy upon us.**

~ HYMN:

LORD JESUS, THINK ON ME (Southwell)

ALL SINGERS – NO ORGAN:

1. Lord Jesus, think on me,
And purge away my sin;
From earthborn passions set me free,

And make me pure within.

St JOHN'S CHOIR – NO ORGAN:

2. Lord Jesus, think on me,
Nor let me go astray;
Through darkness and perplexity
Point thou the heavenly way.

LONDON ADVENTIST CHORALE:

3. Lord Jesus, think on me,
When flows the tempest high:
When on doth rush the enemy
O Saviour, be thou nigh.

ALL SINGERS & ORGAN:

4. Lord Jesus, think on me,
That, when the flood is past,
I may the eternal brightness see,
And share thy joy at last.

[Synesius of Cyrene 375-430, tr A..W.Chatfield (1808-96) and others]

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

It is of course difficult for us to imagine the full horrors of the TransAtlantic Slave Trade in which between 9 and 13 million Africans were enslaved for economic gain. To imagine the fear and foreboding of men, women and children taken from their homes and families; their sense of desperation and despair when chained deep in the holds of slave ships for weeks on end as they were taken on the three and a half thousand mile journey across the Deep River of the Atlantic, before the indignity at being paraded in the slave markets, examined and prodded by potential buyers before entering a lifetime of enslavement, mostly in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean where the work itself was dangerous, where physical and sexual abuse was commonplace and punishments for even minor infringements often sadistic and cruel. The African writer, abolitionist and former slave Oludah Equaino wrote of his experiences:

~ READER A:

“It was very common in several of the islands, particularly in St. Kitt's, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master's name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks. Indeed, on the most trifling occasions, they were loaded with chains; and often instruments of torture were added. The iron muzzle, thumb-screws, &c., are so well known, as not to need a description, and were sometimes applied for the slightest faults. I have seen a negro beaten till some of his bones were broken, for only letting a pot boil over.”

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

Equiano was an energetic and restless man who, through a mixture of good fortune and surviving on his wits, gained his freedom to become an accomplished sailor, explorer and writer, eventually settling just a few miles away from where I stand here in Cambridge today.

Whilst unable to read, many slaves, like Equiano, gained great strength from their knowledge of the Scriptures.

~ READER B:

A reading from the gospel of St Luke, chapter 1.

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate
us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

[Luke 1:68-79]

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

Many individuals expressed their deep horror of slavery, of the Slave Trade and Britain’s leading role in it. Many did not. Indeed within the Church there were those, including church leaders, who used the bible to justify the enslavement of Africans and the Slave Trade.

The campaign for its abolition began in earnest twenty years before the passing of the Act in 1807 with the formation of a Committee of Quakers and Evangelical Christians in London. But the person who drove the work forward was its one

full-time worker, the young Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson set about collecting evidence, organising committees and petitions, lobbying Parliament, producing books, travelling the length and breadth of the country agitating for change. Yet just a few years before, as a student here at St John's, he had apparently been 'wholly ignorant' of the Slave Trade. His transformation began in 1785 with the writing of a student essay. Ambitious and keen for academic glory, he set about answering a question set in a University Prize: 'Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?' But his research haunted him. Clarkson's words are read by Richard Wilberforce, a direct descendant of the abolitionist.

~ READER C:

"It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the day-time I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eye-lids for grief... I always slept with a candle in my room, that I might rise out of my bed and put down such thoughts as might occur to me in the night, if I judged them valuable, conceiving that no arguments of any moment should be lost in so great a cause."

~ CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE:
ANTHEM: DROP, DROP, SLOW TEARS (Leighton)

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

Kenneth Leighton's setting of Phineas Fletcher's words: 'Drop, drop, slow tears'.

During the twenty years of campaigning before the passing of the Slave Trade Act, extraordinary friendships and alliances were built between campaigners like Clarkson and Wilberforce, whose political skill, persuasive oratory and sheer doggedness ensured that after several defeats, the issue of Abolition returned to the Parliamentary agenda.

What united and inspired these individuals as they persevered in pursuit of abolition was the hope expressed in the Scriptures that God had fulfilled his promise to visit his people and bring salvation through his son, Jesus Christ and indeed that he would come again to usher in God's kingdom of justice and peace.

The issue brought together some former slaves, including Equiano and some former slavers like the priest and hymn writer John Newton.

~ HYMN:

HOW SWEET THE NAME OF JESUS SOUNDS (St Peter)

ALL SINGERS & ORGAN:

1. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

LONDON ADVENTIST CHORALE:

2. It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary rest.

St JOHN'S CHOIR – NO ORGAN:

3. Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see thee as thou art,
I'll praise thee as I ought.

ALL SINGERS & ORGAN:

4. 'Till then I would thy love proclaim
With every fleeting breath;
And may the music of thy name
Refresh my soul in death.

[John Newton (1725-1807)]

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

Born and brought up in Uganda, which he was subsequently obliged to leave during Idi Amin's dictatorship, the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, reflects on the historic slave trade and on the unfinished business of campaigning against a multitude of human enslavements.

~ INSERT (The Most Revd and Rt Hon Dr John Sentamu):

May I speak in the name of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

~ ALL:

Amen

How fitting it is that our worship is from St John's College, Cambridge, a college which played an important part in the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. A deadly 'triangle of trade'.

Manufactured goods, including cheap metal bracelets, 'manillas', which became the currency of the slave trade, were shipped from British ports to West Africa where they were traded for slaves and shipped on 'the middle passage', 5-or-600 at a time, to British colonies in North America and the Caribbean where those who survived were auctioned for luxury goods such as rum and sugar for the British market.

Thomas Clarkson, the younger of the two contemporary students, was a tall, studious man with liberal political instincts. William Wilberforce was an elf-like, sociable, quick-witted and instinctively conservative figure. Clarkson's essay – 'Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will' – ignited the abolitionist cause. His powerful gifts as an organiser helped to galvanise the abolitionist movement and to bring the cause into the mainstream of political thinking and moral action. Wilberforce's evangelical faith inspired his continued pressure on the House of Commons from his first speech in 1789 until the passing of the Act eighteen years later. On the night of the 23rd and 24th of February 1807, the Bill to abolish the British slave trade was debated in the House of Commons. At 4 o'clock in the morning, William Wilberforce was cheered to the echo, and left the House with tears streaming down his face, his long struggle completed. In the March of that year, the Bill became law.

The New Testament reading from St Luke's Gospel, the song of Zechariah after the birth of his son, John the Baptist, is a cry of liberation, the prayer of a people who, for centuries, had longed for liberation from enslavement to political and military domination. But it is more than that: it is a song of praise for freedom from the bondage of human sin and from the many enslavements which one human being inflicts on another, freedom won through the coming of a mighty Saviour, freedom through forgiveness, freedom in the paths of peace.

Wilberforce struggled to be faithful to Christ, to politics and to his friends in the world. Struggling with fears within and without he turned to his boyhood hero, the ex-sailor, ex-lecher, ex-slave trader, John Newton for Christian Counsel. Real credit belongs to Newton for keeping Wilberforce in politics. Newton's Hymns like "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken", "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds", "Amazing Grace that Saved a Wretch Like Me", helped to cast out Wilberforce's fears and filled his heart with the perfect love of Christ. A love that gave him courage to go on.

Small wonder that the abolitionists were men and women of Christian commitment and conviction, for they walked the paths of peace and were convinced of the liberating power of Christ, and sure that, because Jesus Christ came to reconcile all things to God, all human beings are brothers and sisters.

As the Medallion with a black figure in chains, manufactured by Wedgwood, for the campaign, aptly asked, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”

It is for Christians today to stand up against the unfinished business of all that enslaves human beings – the slavery of trafficking women and children for sexual exploitation, the enslaving of children as soldiers, the evils of leading young people into the slavery of drug addiction, and enslavement into bonded and forced labour, the enslavement of living in poverty – especially child poverty; not to mention the global bondage of the nations to armaments and warfare. We are all implicated. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible”. (Abraham Heschel, Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience, New York 1967; also in Pacifism and the Jews by Evelyn Wilcock, Hawthorn Press, 1994, p.169)

What drove Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and their colleagues of the time was what must drive us – a refusal to accept the prevailing consensus when it conflicts with our deep-seated conviction that “in the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high has broken upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78 & 79)

God give us grace to let the oppressed go free in the name of our liberating Lord, Jesus Christ the Prince of peace. Amen.

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

In the face of considerable vested interests, black and white abolitionists, some of whom were themselves former slave traders or slaves, worked together inspired by their Christian faith in the extraordinary campaign to abolish the Slave Trade.

This coming together in spirit of Black and white, slave and free is reflected in our anthem ‘Let the Sound of Freedom’ specially written for this service by Ken Burton. Sung by both of our choirs this morning – the London Adventist Chorale and the choir of St John’s College, it draws together the Gospel and Anglican musical traditions.

~ LONDON ADVENTIST CHORALE & CHOIR OF ST JOHN’S COLLEGE: ANTHEM: LET THE SOUND OF FREEDOM ECHO (Ken Burton)

Am I not a man, a man and a brother?
Am I not a woman, a woman and a sister ?

Are we not all one, daughters and sons of one Father.

From the deep I cried, I cried unto heaven
Give ear to the voice, the voice of my supplication
I stretch forth my hand, rescue me from pain and affliction
Draw nigh to my soul; set me up on high by thy salvation

Let the sound of freedom echo through the earth !
Let the sound of freedom echo through the earth !

[Text: Psalms: 140:6, 142:1 70:18, 70:29 / first verse based on an image on a plate by Wedgwood for the 18th Abolition Movement; additional lyrics Burton]

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

‘Let the sound of freedom echo’, specially composed by Ken Burton and sung this morning by the combined choirs of St John’s College and the London Adventist Chorale.

The abolitionists, Clarkson, Equiano, Wilberforce and many, many others provide us with an example of what can be done in our world when people take the scriptures seriously and strive ‘to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God’. But their work is not done. As the Archbishop has reminded us, millions of men and women and children today live out their lives in various forms of enslavement. Let us then pray that we take up the challenge; that it may be truly said that the sound of freedom echoes through the earth.

~ THE REVD LINDSAY ADAM:

Let us pray.
Living loving Father of us all,
we come before your throne of grace
with all those who in past times
have suffered the brutality, fear and injustice of slavery,
grieving with all those who
remember their anguish with pain and bitterness.
Merciful Lord, grant us your healing and your help.

~ ALL:

Amen

Loving Lord God, holy and righteous,
we come before your throne of grace
with all those who have profited unjustly
from the slave trade and from the work done by the slaves;
with all those who received compensation for setting their slaves free,

and with the slaves who were left to fend for themselves.
Merciful Lord,
grant us your healing and your help.
~ **ALL: Amen**

Abba,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
You have graced us with the spirit of freedom,
And the privilege of calling upon you by name.
May we use this precious freedom
To give a voice to all who are enslaved
By poverty or persecution,
Held captive by discrimination or disease.
Grant us courage to name injustice wherever it appears,
and to speak your Word of truth,
Sure that the love of God in Christ Jesus has power
To set all people free,
Enabling them to live in glorious liberty,
As your cherished sons and daughters.
~ **ALL:**
Amen.

[© Clare Amos, USPG]

Jesus Christ taught us to pray for the coming of his Father's kingdom, a kingdom of justice, love and peace. So we say together:

Our Father,
~ **ALL:**
which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done, In earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

~ THE REVD DUNCAN DORMOR:

And so, before we join together in singing John Newton's inspirational hymn 'Amazing Grace!', we reaffirm our commitment and resolve to work for justice and peace and to share the transforming message of Christ by saying together the 'Set All Free' prayer:

~ ALL:

**Gracious and liberating God,
Lift us beyond the burdens of pain and guilt,
Build our memories into life-giving resolutions,
Give us the vision of a new creation,
Strengthen us to act
for justice and human dignity
And set all free.
Amen.**

[Set all Free]

~ HYMN:

AMAZING GRACE (Amazing Grace)

GOSPEL SOLO:

1. Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

SOLO & ALL OTHER SINGERS HUMMING:

2. 'Twas grace first taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear,
the hour I first believed!

St JOHN'S & LONDON ADVENTIST CHORALE GENTS & ORGAN:

3. Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

ALL SINGERS:

4. When we've been there a thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun.

[John Newton (1725-1807) alt. v.5 John Rees (1828-1900)]

Sunday Worship came from St John's College Chapel, Cambridge. The service was led by the Dean, The Reverend Duncan Dormor, and the preacher was the Archbishop of York, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Dr John Sentamu. The choir of St John's College and the London Adventist Chorale were directed by David Hill and Ken Burton. The organist was Leon Charles. The producer was Simon Vivian.

Next week, in the second of this series commemorating the bicentenary of the Act, the Reverend Karen Smith, who was brought up in the American Deep South with children of slaves, reflects on the nature of Christian freedom.

And you may like to know that, in addition to the listen again facility, you can download an ecumenical study guide about the Transatlantic Slave Trade from the 'Sunday Worship' website.