

Slaves and masters: Ephesians ch.6

Many hanks to Robin for today's TFTD.

When I was training for ordained ministry there was an afternoon when we ordinands were asked to discuss the New Testament texts that appear to justify slavery. One thing all we ordinands could agree on was that we were against slavery and found it very perturbing that the texts we were discussing appeared to justify it.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ'. *Ephesians 6:5*. How could we reconcile our beliefs to this text?

Some of the ordinands argued that slavery was accepted as normal 'in those days' and it wasn't accepted now so that somehow made it OK for Paul to tell slaves to obey their masters in the way that he did even though we wouldn't say that today.

I found this to be a very weak argument. It suggests that the will of God changes with the times and that there are no eternal moral absolutes. And it ignores the whole story of God liberating the slaves from Egypt which is told in the Book of Exodus and drives a liberation message through the whole of Scripture.

The other way we ordinands found to make this text acceptable to us was the idea that Paul was in a way calling for slavery to be reformed from within. He called on slaves to work hard for their masters but he also called on masters to treat their slaves kindly and not threaten them. *Ephesians 6:9*. So in this way the spread of Christianity would promote a nicer form of slavery populated with obedient slaves and kindly masters.

At the time I tentatively embraced this second explanation as a way of to get Paul off the hook (as it were) — but I was always uneasy with it. After all, Jesus in the final few days before his death uncompromisingly confronted the authorities in Jerusalem, overturning the tables of the money lenders and all the rest; indeed that is why they killed him. What was Paul doing taking this 'way of the cross' and turning it instead into a cautious, humble way of slow and gentle reform?

Ephesians 6: 5-9 was the go-to text for apologists of slavery in the southern States of America during the nineteenth century. William Meade, Bishop of Virginia 1841-1862 argued that even when slaves were whipped for misdemeanours of which they were innocent, they should accept their punishment gladly because they had probably committed other misdemeanours for which they had gone unpunished and in the

unlikely event that they were innocent of any misdemeanours at all they should thank God for being punished on earth because it would mean they would be rewarded in heaven. And Stephen Elliot, Bishop of Georgia 1841-1866, argued that slavery was a good thing because it had brought millions of Africans to a Christian faith.

Today we wince as we read this. It is wrong at all sorts of levels. And we may wonder what lasting reputational damage to the church and to the Gospel these extraordinary errors of theology and discipleship have caused.

William Meade and Stephen Elliot were trying to say something about slavery and the physical punishment and other tortures that underpinned it that the slave owners and oppressors of their day would find acceptable. Are they not replicating the approach that Paul takes in his letter to the Ephesians? And do our own bishops not replicate this approach today?

Alan Smith is the Bishop of St Albans. He has had a problem these last few days because one of the non-stipendiary priests in his diocese, Rev'd Paula Vennells, was the Chief Executive Officer of the Post Office 2011-2019 at a time when the Post Office presided over what is likely to be the largest miscarriage of justice in British legal history. Furthermore, it has been alleged on the BBC and elsewhere that she commissioned forensic accountants to examine the many cases of alleged fraud by sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and when these accountants reported back that there were strong grounds to suggest that the accused were all innocent she failed to act on that approach thus allowing criminal convictions to stand and continue to blight the lives of thousands of people.

For months now, Alan Smith has resisted calls to suspend Rev'd Vennells. On Monday she said she was withdrawing from parish ministry for a while because the investigation into what had happened at the post Office was a 'distraction'. Alan Smith said it was 'right' that Rev'd Vennells had stepped back and felt it was pertinent to mention in his statement that his father had been a sub-postmaster.

It's not easy being a bishop. Alan Smith has a duty of care to Rev'd Vennells. And he has to balance this duty of care with his duty to all the other people of God and to the Gospel message itself. So, it's not easy.

We have a feeling, don't we, that a Christian finding him or herself in the position Rev'd Vennells found herself in would do the right thing to promote justice and prevent suffering. Does the failure to suspend Rev'd Vennells come from an awkward tradition in the church to ignore justice and instead call on people to endure suffering

at the hands of their masters? Does Ephesians 6: 5-9 still lead the church into positions that it later comes to regret?

I have come to a different way of reading Ephesians 6: 5-9. This is not actually a text that justifies slavery and injustice. Rather it is a pastoral message for people who are suffering injustice without any hope of it ending at present and possibly within their earthly lifetimes. It is a message of comfort for all those people for whom the hope of liberation in the Kingdom of God is their only hope of liberation.

Many of the accused sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were advised by their barristers to admit to crimes which they had not actually committed in the hope that they would thereby avoid a prison sentence. These barristers were not giving bad advice. They were advising their clients on what their options were so that they could make what was the right decision for them given the injustice they faced.

In the same way, the church since earliest times has had to give comfort to people suffering injustice which seems to be unending. The church is called to name God's presence in the midst of injustice. God does indeed offer liberation but not always to the timescales we pray for. The church cannot abandon people when they are in these situations. It must pray with people suffering from injustice.

But there are other moments when the message of the church and the good news of the resurrection has to be very different. When the possibility of earthly liberation exists as a precursor for the liberation in the Kingdom of God, then this is what the church must and does call for, even to the point of showing solidarity with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Let us pray today for people held in slavery all over the world, for people who may technically be free but who are coerced through poverty to endure great suffering and for people who are victims of miscarriages of justice. And let us pray for the church, that she will receive the grace to know when the moment comes to echo God's cry for peace and justice in the world and have the courage to act when these moments come.

© Robin Pye

30th April 2021