

Lord Alton draws lessons from Wilberforce's life

WILBERFORCE

key points

This year we celebrate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. This lifetime work of William Wilberforce post-dated his conversion to Christianity, and he saw abolition as one of two callings 'God Almighty has set before me'.

He was active in prayer in the Clapham Sect, and worked with a broad-based alliance that sought to change public attitudes as well as parliamentary opinion, knowing that without the former, he would not achieve the latter.

The author challenges us about modern dragons that need slaying, and finds examples in abortion and destructive embryo research, and in contemporary slavery.

As MP elected for Hull in 1780, William Wilberforce became the youngest member of the House of Commons. Over the next 53 years he also became its principal spokesman against slavery.

On 22 February 1807 the Commons voted to abolish the slave trade and 1 May 2007 marked the bicentenary of its enactment. Yet it took until the night before Wilberforce's death in 1833 for Parliament to enact the final emancipation measures, including paying off the slave owners. Hearing this news, Wilberforce gave thanks to God: 'I have lived to witness the day on which England is willing to give 20 million pounds sterling for the abolition of slavery'.¹

What can our generation learn from this remarkable life? From his patient endurance, perseverance, methods, strategy, tactics? And what dragons are waiting to be slain today?

Single-minded zeal

In trying to understand Wilberforce's motivation, it stands out that he never held high office, but I doubt he entered politics devoid of ambition. At Cambridge he was already marked out for a successful political career. He and Pitt the Younger formed an enduring friendship and many believed that it was Wilberforce, rather than Pitt, who was destined to lead the nation.

This decision to eschew the usual ministerial career path and use his parliamentary position instead to champion a great cause teaches us a lot. In assessing today's aspiring politicians we might

usefully ask ourselves: 'What are their causes?' If their sole purpose is simply to climb the greasy pole, to *be* things rather than to *do* things, then this probably tells us everything we need to know. Wilberforce though had a passion to *do* things. He had single-minded determination and zeal.

Politics and conversion

Yet it remains the case that politics initially attracted him, not abolishing slavery. Aristotle, the father of democracy, reminds us that the call to political service is among the greatest virtues and that shame - *aidos* - attaches to those who simply opt out.² What would Wilberforce have made of those who self-righteously assert their cynical disregard for the political classes, and opt out of communal responsibilities?

Wilberforce brought to political life a good education. He was articulate, well informed, compassionate, and a man of deep integrity, but so, no doubt, were many contemporaries. What marked him out and changed his destiny was his decision to embrace Christianity. It redefined how he saw humanity - *imago Dei* in all men; it changed his perception of political service.

Wilberforce's conversion post-dated his entry into Parliament and orientated all his subsequent actions. Cardinal John Henry Newman said that God appoints a task for each of us, given to no one else. We each need to find what that task is and never lose sight of it.³ For Wilberforce, the task became clear seven years after he entered the Commons and, despite setbacks



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Hazlitt, a scion of radical endeavour who accused him of being obsessed with misery in far away places. Thornton defended his friend, stating it was like attacking Christopher Columbus for discovering America but for failing to go on to discover Australia and New Zealand as well.

Success in politics is governed by an abiding sense of what matters, by priorities, by not being distracted by every daily dust fight, and by not being deflated or deterred by personal attacks.

Modern day dragons

It took Wilberforce 40 years to abolish slavery and, whilst this year is the 40th anniversary of the Abortion Act, there is no prospect of its imminent repeal. Nearly six million unborn babies have now been aborted in the UK, and one million human embryos have been destroyed or experimented upon. The law still permits abortion up to birth for disability and legislation to permit therapeutic cloning has been enacted. At the other end of life, attempts continue to legalise euthanasia.

Looking abroad, Britain still indirectly funds the coercive one-child policy in China. Recently, the blind barefoot lawyer, Chen Guancheng, was given a four year prison sentence for exposing the forced abortion or sterilisation of 130,000 women in Shandong Province.⁵ We should be deeply ashamed that a man with no sight can see so clearly what many of us choose to ignore.

Two hundred years ago Wilberforce won his argument because men like Captain John Newton - a leading Liverpool slave trader, and composer of *Amazing Grace* - changed their minds. We, too, need to change many minds. And doctors are in a unique position to help create a mentality that appreciates the unique sanctity of every life.

Contemporary slavery

What of other evils? Perhaps 27 million people continue to be enslaved. The International Labour Organisation estimates that 8.4 million children are held in slavery, approximately one child out of every 175 in the world.⁶ In addition, it is said that around 700,000 people are trafficked every year - generating billions of pounds worldwide.

Modern day forms of slavery, based on discrimination because of racial origin, and on forced labour, child trafficking and debt bondage, all underpin the economic and trade relationships from which we continue to benefit. Compared with 1807, modern day slavery tiptoes around in carpet slippers, but it remains pernicious and all too real.

A rekindling

There is no shortage of contemporary dragons to be slain. We must hope and pray that out there somewhere is the next generation of men and women who will search for their appointed tasks and rekindle the spirit of William Wilberforce.

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and defeats, he never gave up. After a deeply affecting encounter in 1787 with the Quaker abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, Wilberforce knew he had found his appointed task. He wrote in his diary: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the Reformation of society'.

Alliances and coalitions

How Wilberforce translated this spiritual insight into action is instructive. Along with Clarkson, Newton, Equiano, Wedgwood, Roscoe and many others, he formed a broad-based alliance that sought to change public attitudes as well as parliamentary opinion. He knew that, without the former, he would not achieve the latter.

Adam Hochschild, the author of *Bury The Chains*, brilliantly sets out the details of the campaign that was waged throughout the UK.⁴ Abolition was not a single-handed feat achieved by William Wilberforce alone, and those who neglect the role of the campaign coalition miss a crucially important point.

Nor did Wilberforce believe he could succeed through his own strength. He knew there was a spiritual dimension. A notable member of the Clapham Sect, a group of Christians who met at the Clapham home of Henry Thornton, he offered regular prayer. The Clapham Christians understood the importance of St Augustine's maxim, 'Pray as if everything depended on God. Work as if everything depended on you.' Wilberforce never neglected to do both.

One of Wilberforce's many detractors was William

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