

**Bishop Michael’s Chrism Service sermon 26 March 2024**

What’s the story? What’s the story? To which I would not be in the least surprised if you were to reply with the words ‘Which story?’

For I want to begin today by thanking all involved in ministry and gathered here for the extraordinary complexity and scale of the work you undertake. Thank you that you navigate so many different stories – from enabling the worship of God’s people to caring for folk at the most significant moments of their lives. From battling with churchyard regulations to setting up debt counselling centres. From being consulted about the common fund to leading your churches towards the goal of net carbon zero. I could go on for hours and yet barely scratch the range and diversity of what you do. We hold together a kazillion stories. They make most of our working days feel like the greeting I once received from Dave, one of our amazing virgirs here at the cathedral,

who during a particularly turbulent time in the story of this place met me coming through the front door with the words ‘Welcome to another day in the Big Brother House!

As we gather here for the Chrism Eucharist I’d like to pull out for us just one particular story that’s going on in our churches at the current time and that many of you will have been grappling with. It’s the story of how, as the Church of England, we should respond to the links that we have had in the past with the practice of chattel slavery. Our current attention to this stems from research which found that a predecessor of our Church Commissioners’ current endowment, invested in and received income from an entity called the South Sea Company which over its trading lifetime forced nearly 42,000 people to leave the African coast. It disembarked into slavery almost 35,000 people meaning that just over 7,000 died on the crossings.

Put simply, some of the funds we’re sitting on now come from our church’s involvement in chattel slavery back then.

Lots of people will have said to you ‘Why should this matter? What happened back then has nothing to do with our lives now. The past is the past.’ Were it that that were the case. But it’s just not true. In individual lives and the national stories of people and countries whose ancestors were most affected, slavery’s legacy continues to be experienced in poor health and education, poverty, reduced opportunities and discrimination. And it affects us too. As any of us involved in pastoral ministry know, our history, our story, our background shapes powerfully who we are and what we do today. And where there’s denial of past hidden secrets and uncomfortable truths – well in your experience doesn’t it come back to bite us?

In response to this our Church Commissioners have set up their much misunderstood and misreported Fund for Healing, Repair and Justice. The fund will be investing in social entrepreneurs and builders of social capital drawn from disadvantaged Black communities, growing a movement that will help all of us to respond practically to our past. It won’t be giving cash to individuals or governments and the fund does have big ambitions - to grow its investment capital to a billion pounds in the coming years. But much more it aims to enable a response that’s of the heart. That’s why I’m so proud of work that’s happening across this diocese to enable us to come to terms with where slavery has touched our story – from the slavery trail here in Wells, to Bath Abbey’s work on its contested monuments, to work in Stockland Bristol over in the Quantocks where the church is leading work to come to terms with the fact that almost an entire village was built out of the profits of the slave trade.

But why, of all the subjects I could have touched on today, have I wanted to reflect on the way that our story is connected with slavery? I do so because I learnt recently about ‘the Slave Bible’ which is being shown as part of an exhibition being held at Lambeth Palace Library of documents relating to our past complicity in the slave trade. The ‘Slave Bible’ was published on behalf of the Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves. Whereas a standard protestant Bible contains 1189 chapters, the Slave Bible contains only 232. It excludes 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New. Within its pages, many references to freedom and escape from slavery are removed while passages encouraging loyalty and submission to masters are emphasized. By way of example, the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Exodus are missing.

Imagine if the Slave Bible was our Bible. We’d never have heard the first reading we listened to today, the instructions to God’s people about the Passover which would enact their liberation from slavery and bondage in Egypt towards freedom and the promised land. We’d never have known that God’s preference is for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. I don’t know which other chapters the Slave Bible missed out but imagine if we’d never heard from 1 Corinthians of Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist as he gathered with his friends to celebrate the Passover on the night of his betrayal and arrest. We’d be unaware that as Jesus entered his darkest hours his response was to tell his followers that no matter what happens he will always be with us and that we can be with him when we meet together in his name and share bread and wine. What would we be like if our Gospel from John 13 hadn’t made the cut?

If we’d never read that our deepest identity as followers of Jesus comes when we offer ourselves not in power or domination but in the service and vulnerability that happens when we wash one another’s feet? When we invert the ways of the world where the powerful sit at the top and everyone else has to do what they say. When we become a community of love where everyone whatever their background or ability or disability or identity has a valued and treasured place.

What’s the story? As we gather for our Chrism Eucharist today these are our stories. Thanks be to God that we have them, and that they make us the people we are and the Church we are created to be. They’re a very different story to that told by the world around us – whose themes are of power and domination, of violence and division, of inequity and prejudice.

All the things that made it OK for us to invest in slavery back then. All the things we need to fess up to and turn away from now.

Because when we do that we can live and tell the greatest parts of our story of Jesus that we’ll be remembering during the next few days. The story of Jesus’s last supper, his betrayal, arrest and trial. Of the cross and Jesus’s bursting from the tomb. The death defying, love exhibiting, life creating, world transforming story of Jesus who came to set us free from all that separates us from God and each other and who came to bring reconciliation to all that is. That’s our story. Let’s live it. And let’s tell it. Amen.