

ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE: A VIEW FROM BRITAIN

A MAN came to the Prophet Muhammad and said: "Guide me to a deed that makes me close to Heaven and far from Hell." The Prophet replied: "Free a person and redeem a slave."

For many weeks now, this business of the freeing of slaves has been occupying the attention of the media, as Britain marks the 200th anniversary of the Act that abolished the slave trade.

The highlight of events so far has been a service at Westminster Abbey, attended by the Queen and Prince Philip.

Also attending were a number of dignitaries, including Prime Minister Tony Blair and Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams, as well as several descendants of slaves and of people who took an active part in the abolitionist movement.

The service was well on its way when it was suddenly interrupted by a black rights activist, Nigerian-born Toyin Agbetu, who caused a major security scare by striding up close to the Queen, shouting: "You should be ashamed. Do not do this in my name. This service is a disgrace. It is an insult to Africa."

He had quite a bit more to say along the same lines but as he stood and ranted before the 2000-strong congregation, security

guards rushed forward and surrounded him.

But he proved difficult to seize and calm down. At one point, five policemen, two ushers and some of his friends were attempting to control him.

However, he stood his ground and shouted directly at the Queen, accusing her, together with Mr Blair, of not having the decency to make an apology and say sorry.

His protest was aimed at forcing the Queen and the Prime Minister to issue a full apology for the role that the Royal Family and the State played in the slave trade over three centuries.

There are many who believe that the Royal Family built much of its fortune on the trade. According to them, Elizabeth the First began investing in it in 1564. Charles the Second established his own slave trading company and his brother, the Duke of York, had the initials "DY" branded on the left buttock or breast of each of his 3,000 slaves.

George the Third's son, the Duke of Clarence, even led opposition to the efforts of William Wilberforce and others to have the trade banned.

But the Royal Family and the Government have both refused to follow the example of the Church of England and apologise publicly



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for their roles in the slave trade.

In his sermon, Dr Williams, head of the Church of England, emphasised that slavery had not gone away. He said: "In the forms in which it is still around today — debt slavery, sex trafficking, forced labour, child abduction and exploitation — it is an offence against the created order of equality."

He added: "We who are the heirs of the slave-owning and slave-trading nations of the past have to face the fact that our historic prosperity was built in large part on this atrocity. And those who are the heirs of the countries ravaged by the slave trade know very well that much of their present suffering and struggling is the result of centuries of abuse."

Earlier, in a radio debate, Dr Williams said the Church should consider paying reparations for the slaves it once owned because it profited from compensation payments made when slavery was outlawed in the 1830s. Calls for reparations to be paid to the descendants of slaves have grown in recent years, with campaigners saying that the money could help pay off the debts of African nations.

Anglican organisations and individuals received more than 20-thousand pounds in compensation when slavery was abolished, the equivalent of more than 1.5 million pounds today.

The Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Foreign Parts, an Anglican grouping, received nine thousand pounds for slaves who were freed from its plantation in Barbados.

Guyanese-born Baroness Amos, reading from the Bible at the Abbey service, chose Luke, Chapter 4: "Jesus travelled to Nazareth where he had grown up. On the sabbath day, he went to the synagogue as he always did and stood up to read.

The book of Isaiah the prophet was given to him. He opened the book and found the place where this is written: "The Lord has put his Spirit in me because he

appointed me to tell the good news to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness."

Lady Dawson, a direct descendant of William Wilberforce, whose name will always be associated with the abolition of the slave trade, spoke of him as her visionary forbear for whom abolition was a God-given vocation.

She said, "In 1789, he presented his first abolition Bill to the House of Commons, making a historic speech which exposed the full evils of the slave trade. But delaying tactics meant that the Bill failed.

Almost every year, he tried to get the Bill passed and, after 20 years of campaigning, he saw it finally passed in 1807."

Trinidad (as distinct from Trinidad and Tobago) was the first British colony to completely abolish slavery in the 1830s.

It seems fitting, therefore, that on 1 August 1985, Trinidad (and Tobago) should become the first country in the world to declare a national holiday, Emancipation Day, to commemorate abolition.