

Homily for William Wilberforce, Abolitionist, July 29, 1833
July 30, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Galatians 3:23–29; Psalm 146:4–9; Matthew 25:31–40

William Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759. He died on July 29, 1833, at the age of 73. He was from a prosperous trading family in Hull, after London, the second seaport of the English east coast. He grew up in a family where, not unusual for the time and place, many died in childbirth and younger than older. His father died when he was nine, two of his sisters in childhood. His sister Sarah would predecease him in 1816. He was the only male in his generation of the larger family, and it made him a wealthy man.

When his father died. His mother sent him to London to live with his uncle and aunt. They were Methodists, serious English Christians of that time. He was twelve when his mother heard about his exposure to Methodism. She went to London and brought him home. He went to Cambridge. At 21, he was elected to Parliament. But the Lord had not left him. He had an adult conversion experience when he was 26. In Parliament, he was soon recognized as an

extraordinarily gifted speaker. He had a “natural eloquence.”¹

During a tour on the continent, he returned to the Methodism of his late childhood. He returned to London and turned to John Newton, the former slaver, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” Newton was then rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, one of the parishes within London’s medieval city. Wilberforce dedicated his life to the abolition of the slave trade. In 1787, he and others founded the Anti-Slavery Society. I’ve always found it hard to read accurate histories of the conditions under which slaves lived and the too-often cruel, evil, and brutal punishments to keep them subjugated.

The British Parliament ended the slave trade in 1807.² When Wilberforce he died in the early hours of July 29, 1833, the bill to abolish slavery was completing passage through the House of Commons. On August 20, the House of Lords approved the measure. A month later, on August 28, 1833, King William IV signed it into law.³

¹ William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (New York: Harcourt, Inc.), 493.

² *Ibid.*, 354–56.

³ *Ibid.*, 502–03. See the note that begins at the bottom of page 502.

From time to time, I've wished I had been brought up to keep a diary. In 1997, when I was 43 years old, visiting the University of Virginia, where I had gone to college, I saw the inspired architecture of Jefferson's home and the university he founded in a new way.

By then, because of my interest in genealogy, I knew I was descended on my mother's side of the family from more than a few people who owned slaves—not plantation owners, small farmers, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I learned a couple of years ago that, when one of my pilgrim ancestors died, a tenth-great grandfather, who was on the *Mayflower* as a five-year-old, died owning a Native American—almost certainly a captive of the wars between the newcomers and those who were there first.

That day back at the university, the balustrades along the rooftops of Jefferson's home and the original buildings of the University of Virginia brought to mind the pictures one can see of the backs of slaves marked for the rest of their lives by the whippings they received. I think of the cruelty of those whippings whenever I think about Jefferson's buildings that I love. It was a great evil, a great sin, to think of other beings as slaves, or in the case of Russia, serfs.

When I have been asked what I thought of Robert E. Lee, my usual response is, “He was wrong about the greatest moral issue of his day.” I hope we will not be wrong about the challenging moral issues of our days in our time.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2020 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.