

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families
Sunday 25th October 2020 at 10:30 am.

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Call to Worship

Let us thank God for each other as we share in worship, as we come to pray and praise.
Let us thank God for the witness of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit to inspire and move us.

Hymn

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed

*My chains are gone - I've been set free, my God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns - Unending love, amazing grace*

The Lord has promised good to me; His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures

*My chains are gone - I've been set free, my God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns - Unending love, amazing grace*

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow; the sun forbear to shine
But God, Who called me here below, will be forever mine.

Prayers of Praise, Thanksgiving and Confession

We bring ourselves to a moment of quiet, to our share virtual space of rest, to a place of peace, to this place of safety and welcome.

We bring ourselves to cast off the cares of the world and for a time to reflect on you, Lord God, that our batteries may be recharged, our direction be refocused and our energy renewed; that we may let go of things that hamper us and be free to care gently for those we share time with.

Holy Spirit of God, forgive us and assure us that our sins are forgiven, that our lives are renewed, that we are loved, cherished and cared for.

Readings



Deuteronomy 34: 1 – 12 – Moses is shown the land

Matthew 22: 34 – 46 – the question to Jesus on which commandment in law is the greatest

1 Thessalonians 2: 1 - 8 – Paul reinforces the need to have confidence in God

Psalm 90:1 – 6, 13 and 14 –rejoice and be glad in all our days

Reflection - by Professor Clyde Binfield

October is Black History Month. No historian can ignore the challenge in that word, "History", but I begin with a question: "Who do you think you are?" There is a whole television programme devoted to answering it. The English, love to pigeon-hole people; placing a person, we know where we stand. There is the itch to categorize, even when there is more to each of us than meets the eye.

So let me introduce you to Congregational minister, Henry Bromley. Reading about him we think of a run-of-the-mill nineteenth-century parson who failed to hit any headlines. Born North London, December, 1798 when Britain was at war with France and George III was King; died North London, February, 1878 when trouble was brewing in the Balkans and Victoria was Queen-Empress.

No such excitements seem to have disturbed his own long life. He outlived two wives, Joanna and Jane; he left no children. His vocation to ministry was clear from boyhood. He went to theological college at eighteen, was called to his first pastorate as a twenty-two. His ministry was uneventful – at Appledore in Devon and at Clavering and Harwich in Essex. They thought the world of him at Clavering where his congregations numbered 600. He only left because of Joanna's ill health.

Which best explains the change of direction: for the last twenty-five years of his life he ran the newly-formed Congregational Pastors Insurance Aid Society from an office in London. The idea was to aid pastors in making provision by assurance on their lives for their widows and children". It was not exciting work but it was "a post he filled with pure affection to the close of his life".

Does it really merit a sermon? Let me colour my picture a little more. Bromleys were proud Nonconformists for generations. Lawyers in town and farmers in the country. So let's join young Henry, growing up at the Suffolk farm his father inherited at Badmondfield, attending the parish church each Sunday afternoon but the Congregational meeting-house each Sunday morning.

There Joanna Vassa enters his life: daughter of the well-known Gustavus Vassa "the African."

Who was this Vassa, and how did his daughter meet and marry a country Congregational minister?

Today Vassa is known by the name he returned to at the end of his life: Olaudah ("Loud of Voice", "Well-Spoken") Equiano. He found fame and fortune through his best-selling autobiography: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. It remains a classic account of African slave experience. It also tells us who this man was.

Olaudah was a man of remarkable literary, linguistic, practical, and administrative skills. To these were added personal charisma, spiritual and intellectual depth, and the constitution of an ox. He was an Igbo, from Benin (south-eastern Nigeria), probably born in 1745. At eleven he was precipitated into a roller-coaster life of slavery and brutality, hope constantly beckoning and constantly deferred. This life took him around the West Indies, to the Mosquito Coast, Virginia, Philadelphia and up to Canada - and much later to the Arctic on a ship with a certain fifteen-year-old Horatio Nelson as a ship-mate. Was Olaudah the first African to have got that far?

Slavery shaped his life but Christianity gave him grace to make sense of it. His book was the biography of a soul as well as a slave. His father was a man of note, with slaves of his own. So slavery was already a fact of West African life. Partnering with their African suppliers, British slave-trading expeditions trafficked three-and-a-half million Africans to the Americas in the greatest forced migration in modern history before the twentieth century.

At first they called him Jacob. He became Gustavus Vassa when sold in Virginia to Michael Pascal, a naval captain. Pascal passed him on to two sisters, who sent him to school in England where seeds of faith were planted. He was told that he would not get to heaven unless he were baptised, so he was and they called him "the Black Christian". Accused of running away he was sold on and went back to where he had started, slave-wise.

Or did he? There was a notion that baptism together with the fact of being on English soil freed a slave. Young Vassa, however, was ever to be “passed on, like loose change, from one set of hands to another” - unless he could save enough money to buy his freedom.

Two subsequent owners, one a Quaker, recognised Vassa’s managerial skills. Within four years he had saved £70, enough to buy his freedom. On 10th July, 1766 he received his papers of manumission. “I who had been a slave in the morning, trembling at the will of another, now became my own master, and completely free.” It was a significant moment. People were beginning to talk of human rights. Men and women were becoming campaigners. Olaudah Equiano, the African, a free man now, was a key figure in this, on his way to becoming “the most famous, and the most influential, African of his generation”, guided by growing yet undimmed faith.

It was a long-drawn out business. A parson had given him a book and he learned to read. He had come across Quakers, among the first to question slavery. In Quaker Philadelphia he was astonished to hear a woman preach at a meeting. It was several years later, after two years of spiritual crisis, that he found peace. It was the evening of 6th October, 1774. Reading his Bible, he came to Acts 4, v. 12: “For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved.” He too saw Christ crucified on Calvary, and was saved. He knew who Christ was. A free man for eight years, he was, at last, a slave no longer.

Today is Bible Sunday and the last Sunday in Black History Month. Olaudah Equiano had seen the impact of Moses leading his people from servitude, which lies behind our reading from Deuteronomy. No doubt he savoured, in time, the “who do you think I am?” questions Jesus asks in Matthew’s gospel. The Pharisees often asked “who does he think he is?” To listen to the answer they would have to commit themselves to the Messiah. They could not.

But Olaudah was now committed. He became a spokesman for the several thousand blacks who lived in London. He was involved in the scheme to resettle Africans in Sierra Leone. It was now that the campaign to abolish the slave trade began in earnest, with Olaudah (still most often known as Gustavus Vassa the African) as the foremost black spokesman. And it was now that he published his *Interesting Narrative*.

It ran to nine editions in his lifetime and he eventually met Susanna Cullen, of Soham in Cambridgeshire, a subscriber to the book’s third edition. They married and a daughter, Joanna, was born. Family friend, John Audley, a member of the Congregational church in Cambridge, an early supporter of the London Missionary Society and an executor of Olaudah’s will, ensured that Joanna was properly educated and was a witness at her wedding. The groom was one Henry Bromley, newly ordained minister at Appledore in North Devon.

What, I wonder, did the congregations in Appledore, Clavering, and Harwich make of Mr and Mrs Bromley? Did they feel they were sharing in a long moment of revolution and reformation? Or was it an occasion for tittle-tattle? Who does she think she is?

Fast forward to 13 May, 1853 and the Congregational Union’s May Meetings; all-male affairs, though women found their way to the galleries of whichever great London chapel hosted them. On that day the Union debated a resolution on American slavery. Proposers and distinguished American guests spoke at considerable length but I suspect these speeches were eclipsed by the first official welcome of a woman to the platform of the Congregational Union: Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been published the previous year.

And I am sure many eyes were drawn to the dark-skinned wife of the young delegate, Reverend Henry Bromley, sitting in the gallery. Did some ask, even then, “Who does she think she is?”

Who do you think you are? We, who live in times as revolutionary as theirs, for such is now our normal, might begin to feel that we know who they were. Where, in such times, do we stand?

Song for Reflection (R&S 643)

When Israel was in Egypt's land (*Let my people go!*) oppressed so hard they could not stand:
(*Let my people go!*)

Refrain: Go down, Moses! Way down in Egypt's land, tell old Pharaoh: "Let my people go!"

The Lord told Moses what to do (*Let my people go!*) to lead the Hebrew children through:
(*Let my people go!*) - **Refrain**

When they had reached the other shore (*Let my people go!*), they let the song of triumph soar:
(*Let my people go!*) - **Refrain**

Lord, help us all from bondage flee (*Let my people go!*) and let us all in Christ be free:
(*Let my people go!*) - **Refrain**

Prayer of Intercession

Lord God, we pray for those who have brought us to faith, who have shown us your love, who have tended to our needs, physical, emotional and spiritual.

We pray for those who have put themselves in harm's way for us and others. We pray for those whose lives have been made harder because they have sought to serve you and help their fellow human beings.

We pray for those whose selfless acts have caused them distress. We pray for those who have at any cost shared the gospel of Christ.

We pray for those imprisoned and tortured for their faith and witness.

We pray for those who are on our hearts and minds today...

We pray for a more just world using your prayer....

Our Father...

Hymn (R&S 553)

To Abraham and Sarah the call of God was clear:

'Go forth and I will show you a country rich and fair.

You need not fear the journey for I have pledged my word:
that you shall be my people and I will be your God.'

From Abraham and Sarah arose a pilgrim race,
dependent for their journey on God's abundant grace.
and in their heart was written by God this saving word:
that you shall be my people and I will be your God.'

We of this generation on whom God's hand is laid,
can journey to the future secure and unafraid!
rejoicing in God's goodness and trusting in this word:
that you shall be my people and I will be your God.'

Blessing

The blessing of the God of Love, whose Spirit stirs us in anger and in peace,
Is with us all, in our weakness and in our strength,
In our fears and in our potential, now and always.

For of all the names in the world this is the only one by which we can be saved.

Go now into the broken world in the strength of the one who was broken.
Stand with the oppressed in the shadow of the one who died for justice.
Live the life of love
Until the God of Love shines in our lives.