

Message from Bishop Robert

15 October



I had the immense privilege last weekend of visiting our link Diocese in Western Tanganyika. Just over two hours flight inland from Dar es Salam, the capital of Tanzania, the Diocese sits close to the Congo border. Within the Diocese the town of Ujiji is famously where Stanley met Livingstone and more infamously, for many years a holding place for men, women and children captured and enslaved, before transportation to Zanzibar and then on to Mauritius and India among other destinations.

I was there to celebrate and to strengthen our partnership, spending time with Bishop Emmanuel and the people of the Diocese, rejoicing in our common faith. Yet somehow as I visited different communities and enjoyed the generous hospitality of the people, the cries of those enslaved seemed not distant. Being there, I found myself reminded of conversations in which Bishop Rachel and I shared at the College of Bishops meeting last month in Oxford. There we reflected on our part as a nation and more specifically as the Church of England in the slave trade and on how we had benefitted, and indeed benefit still from the labour of those who were enslaved from that place and so many others like it across Africa.

The most striking part of our Oxford conversations was a visit to the statue of Christopher Codrington in All Souls College. Codrington was the owner of a plantation in Barbados and of some hundreds of slaves who worked the land. On his death in 1836, these plantations and the slaves were left in his will to the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). Men, women and children, made in the image and likeness of God enslaved for the Gospel?



The slave traders planted trees along the slave route to mark the path

While not all slavery has ended, thankfully in this form it has, and we rightly celebrate all those, including those in the more recent history of the Church who played their part in this. SPG's successor body has both worked hard to recognise the dark and shameful past and to begin to make reparations yet the legacy of slavery lives on not least in our economy and in the economy of the Church. It was sobering at the College in Oxford to listen to the Chair of the Church Commissioners, the body that oversees the financial assets of the Church of England, set out the findings of the forensic accounting that has detailed how much of our assets today are the proceeds of this evil and to set out how we are still benefitting financially from this evil today. It was both joyous and uncomfortable to confirm members of the Church in Tanzania knowing that not so long ago their ancestors were being hunted down and sold and that, that the Church of which I am a part is a beneficiary.

This is why welcome Project Spire as necessary and urgent. Spire is the Church Commissioner's scheme to invest a significant sum of the Church's money in the people and communities that have suffered as a result of slavery. It's a programme that has been criticised by those who would say it is history and we must move on, but it's a long history and a history that is living in our Church today in our assets. Others have said that it should not be about money, yet as one descendant of slaves speaking to the College said to us, "You made it about money when your forebears enslaved my forebears, my family, for your financial gain". Project Spire is both a matter of justice and a moral necessity.

It's why I also rejoice in this 'Black History Month' with its opportunity for these stories to be told. Uncomfortable but true, stories that need to be heard and that need a response.

It was very special to stand in the beautiful lands of Western Tanganyika last weekend with the people who live there, our beautiful brothers and sisters in Christ. A land and a people that have been marred by such evil, a land that seeks right justice, the justice for which we pray, thy Kingdom come.

May we say Amen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font. The first letter 'R' is large and loops back. The name is followed by a small cross-like mark.