A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

Edward Mortimer

on

Sunday, 6 November 2016

Each year on this Sunday we celebrate, as required by our by-laws, the Commemoration of the Founder and Benefactors; and the Warden, following the same by-law, directs "some Fellow or former Fellow of the College" to preach a sermon.

He's very polite though, our Warden. He "directs" with a velvet glove. "John Drury and I wonder whether you could be persuaded…" said his email, back in February. And I in turn wondered whether any Fellow, receiving that invitation, had ever had the nerve to remain *un*-persuaded. If one did, I suppose they would be expected to keep quiet about it, like someone who refuses a knighthood. Anyway, over the decades a remarkable and growing diversity of Fellows have allowed themselves to be persuaded, to the point where it would now seem rather priggish to say No. So here I stand – feeling rightly or wrongly, like Luther at the Diet of Worms, that I have no choice.

But I do have a choice of theme. And the question of *how* an institution like ours should commemorate its benefactors is surely an appropriate theme, which happens also to be very topical. Oxford, like many universities in the English-speaking world, and perhaps beyond, is caught up in a debate – or rather a series of interconnected debates – on precisely this matter.

The "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, which started in South Africa last year, quickly spread to this university and has provoked intense argument. Perhaps surprisingly, its main target in Oxford, so far, has not been Rhodes House or the Rhodes Trust but a building across the street from here, which until now had been almost anonymous. At least, there is no notice on the outside to tell you what it is or who it belongs to. I must have passed by it quite a few hundred times in the course of my life, and often wondered what it was. (I could easily have found out, but my curiosity was too weak. I always forgot to ask.) As we all know now, it is part of Oriel College, and was built with a bequest from Cecil Rhodes, whose statue, well above eye level, forms the centrepiece of its somewhat portentous façade. Such is the Rhodes whose fall, or removal, the movement in Oxford has been demanding.

In a small way, so far, All Souls is caught in the backwash of this storm. We too have a benefactor some of whose activities would be illegal, and considered profoundly immoral, if he were to engage in them today. Our library, which many consider the architectural gem of the college, was built with his money, and is named after him. And there in the centre of it he too has a statue, resplendent in Roman military garb, and adorned with a Latin epitaph by Addison. Most of us, I think, feel great affection for that building, and the institution that it houses. In some sense, indeed, we take pride in it. We certainly take great pleasure in showing it, and the statue, to our visitors.

But now, perhaps belatedly, we find ourselves having to ask whether pride is the right emotion. Should we, on the contrary, be *ashamed* of our benefactor? If so, should we continue to benefit from his bequest? And if not, what should we do about it?

Or can we avoid those last two questions by giving a negative answer to the first? It is certainly very tempting to do just that – to brush the whole issue aside as an absurd exercise in misplaced guilt. How or why, we might ask, can we possibly be expected to feel ashamed of things done by someone who died more than two centuries before any of us were born? However he made his money, should we not simply be grateful that it has been spent so well? Like the

Emperor Vespasian on receiving the proceeds of the public urinals he had installed in Rome, could we not hold it to our nose and pronounce "non olet"?

Yes, it is tempting. But I'm not sure we can let ourselves off quite so lightly. It may indeed be that *shame* is not really the issue, or at least that that word will not help us to grasp what the issue is. "Shame" may sometimes be a synonym for remorse, directly related to the knowledge of a misdeed that one has oneself committed. But its meaning can also be much broader. The first definition given in the Shorter OED is "the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own), or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency." So it is quite possible for me to feel ashamed of being associated with Christopher Codrington, without feeling personally responsible for his actions.

One thing I *am* ashamed of, and for which I do feel responsible, is that it took me so long to realise that there even might be a problem. That happened only eight years ago, when Baroness Scotland came as my guest to the Chichele Dinner. (She, as you probably know, was then Attorney-General of England, and is now Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. More to the point, she is of Afro-Caribbean descent – born, in fact, in one of those very Leeward Islands of which Codrington was "Capitaneus Generalis et Gubernator".) When we went into the Library for dessert, she took one look at his statue and said, "Good God, you even have a statue of this man. Do you know what he did?" I mumbled that, given the time and place of his life, I assumed he was likely to have owned slaves. She maintained that he actually *bred* slaves as livestock on the island of Barbuda, with the result that its inhabitants to this day, both male and female, are unusually tall and strapping.

Though often repeated, and widely believed in the Caribbean, this story is apparently not true – it was carefully investigated and disproved in the 1970s by two scholars from Liverpool and UCL. Codrington, it seems, was a relatively enlightened slave-owner. At least, he was a man of learning and piety, who believed that his slaves had immortal souls, and was anxious for their spiritual welfare. (This was the motive for his other great bequest, of his plantations in Barbados, to be managed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for the benefit of what has become Codrington College.) And he was a friend of John Locke – who himself, incidentally, not only justified slavery philosophically as "a state of war continued between a lawful conqueror and a captive", but was also a shareholder in the Royal African Company, one of the biggest slave-trading enterprises of the time.

In making moral judgements about individuals of that time, or any time before our own, we should exercise due humility. None of us can say with certainty, hand on heart, that if we had lived then we would have behaved better. Nor can we know what judgment future generations will pass on *us*. They may perhaps, for instance, find the fact that we regularly ate other animals no less abhorrent than, for us, is the fact that Codrington and many of his contemporaries considered it normal to own other human beings.

But charity or indulgence towards individuals who lived before us does not entail retrospective approval of their actions. The questions we face today are not really about them, but about ourselves. The case made by movements such as Rhodes Must Fall is that by keeping a statue of someone in public view, or continuing to name a building or institution after him, we are not in fact *refraining* from passing judgement on that person, but implicitly passing a favourable one. We are generally happy to see statues of Lenin and Stalin and Saddam Hussein torn down. We would *not* be happy if German colleges or libraries were named after Adolf Hitler. So clearly, whether we choose to act or not to act, we are making some kind of moral statement.

So, one set of questions raised by our relationship with benefactors is about "messaging", to use a rather ugly 21st-century term. By refusing to remove a statue, or to rename a building or institution, we are saying something which may – indeed, clearly does – cause offence to some of our contemporaries. We need to think whether we care about that – and if we do, how far we are willing to go to re-phrase or clarify our "message" so that it is less hurtful.

Another set of questions is about the continuing effects of harm done in the past. If we are benefiting from Codrington's bequest, are there others who continue to suffer as a result of his actions? If so, do we owe them something? This is the concept of "reparative justice", eloquently expounded by Sir Hilary Beckles, vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies, in his lecture in Oxford earlier this year. I find that I myself had stumbled on this concept, without knowing its name, in a speech I drafted for Kofi Annan to make in Durban in 2001, at the World Conference Against Racism:

> Tracing a connection with past crimes may not always be the most constructive way to redress present inequalities, in

> material terms. But man does not live by bread alone. The sense of continuity with the past is an integral part of each man's or each woman's identity. Some historical wrongs are traceable to individuals who are still alive, or corporations that are still in business. They must expect to be held to account.

"Corporations that are still in business": in drafting that, I had in mind commercial enterprises that directly exploited human beings in an inhumane way, for instance by employing slave labour. All Souls's connection with Codrington's plantations is not so direct. As it happens, the money he left us was drawn not from those plantations but from his estates in Gloucestershire. I don't think that allows us to wash our hands of the matter. He was a wealthy man, from a family which had grown wealthy largely from the proceeds of slave labour, and that enabled him to feel he could afford to bequeath a very large sum to All Souls. (His family did not think it *entitled* him to do so: they contested the will, but – happily for us – they lost the case.)

These, however, are details, which hardly affect the big picture. We may not be a corporation in quite the sense that I, or Kofi Annan, had in mind, but we are "still in business", and we acknowledge a debt of gratitude to someone whose wealth derived in large part from slavery. It is too late to pay compensation to the slaves themselves, but we surely owe *something* to their descendants. Can we trace them? Probably not, in the literal sense that Georgetown University has been able to trace some of the descendants of the 272 slaves whom it sold, in 1838, in order to pay off its debts. Georgetown is seeking to make amends to those descendants in various ways, notably by giving them preferential status in its admissions process.

We need to think more broadly. We benefited, and are in some ways still benefiting, from the proceeds of slavery as it existed in the Caribbean more than 300 years ago. In that we are far from being alone. Many British institutions did the same. It has even been argued that Britain derived from slavery and the slave trade a significant part of the wealth that made possible its industrial revolution and rise to world power. That is still controversial; and it should also be noted that a significant part of Britain's wealth and power was applied, in the 19th century, to the task of driving the transatlantic slave trade *out* of business. But the West Indies, populated by the descendants of slaves, remains a relatively poor part of the world, struggling to develop its economy and its institutions, including those of higher learning. One of those institutions is Codrington College, whose Principal, the Reverend Dr Michael Clarke, attended the excellent conference organized by Arthur Asseraf and Max Harris last month. Codrington College does have financial difficulties and, if we want to make any kind of material reparation for Christopher Codrington's activities after all these years, that would seem a good place to start.

But perhaps the most important set of questions raised by Rhodes Must Fall and related movements is neither about the specific memorials to benefactors nor about the material debt owed to present victims of past crimes, but about the kind of community Oxford is today, and the kind it wishes to be. The demands of these movements may seem needlessly provocative, but there *was*, surely, a need for the broader debates they have provoked, about the composition of the academic and student body in this university, and the content of the curriculum.

Diversity is constantly invoked these days, and in this college we have made a big effort, over the last three decades, to become more diverse in terms of gender. Have we devoted as much attention to recruiting Fellows from black or minority ethnic backgrounds? We proudly display in Hall the portrait of Sir Hugh Springer, who was a Senior Visiting Fellow in 1962-3, but he does look rather lonely; and we have only ever elected one Examination Fellow of black African descent – William Abraham, from Ghana, in 1959. I look in vain for anyone of that description among our current Fellows, in any category. Should that not worry us, more than it apparently does?

The participant in last month's conference who made the biggest impression on me was Ms Michelle Codrington, a black schoolteacher who was born and has lived all her life in Oxford, but whose family come from St Vincent. Could she be a descendant of our benefactor? It's theoretically possible, but unlikely. What is much more likely is that her forebears *belonged* to him, or to his family. She did not seem like someone with a grievance; nor did she come to demand reparations. But she did feel ambivalent, to say the least, about the man whose name she bears and whom we commemorate. The Old Library, where the conference was held, was – she said – the nearest she had ever been to that other Library, and she was clearly not keen to go any nearer. That perhaps is understandable, but what seemed sadder was her feeling that the College and the University were foreign territory to her, a kind of forbidden city to which she did not have access, even though living in the same town. That too, surely, is something we need to take note of, and think what we can do to change.

Let me now come back to my three questions, and sum up my answers.

Should we be ashamed of our benefactor? I think not, if that means pretending we have nothing to do with him. But yes, in the sense that we should feel, and express, some discomfort about the broader legacy of the institution from which he derived most of his wealth. Slavery is an abomination whenever and wherever it is found, and was especially so in the form imposed on Africans transported to the New World. It is no doubt easier for us to say that now than it would have been in Codrington's time, but some people did say it then, and we should not be squeamish about saying it now.

Secondly, should we continue benefiting from his bequest? There I think we have no choice. At least, whatever is proposed for the name and the statue, no one as far as I know is suggesting that we demolish the Library or give away its contents. And my feeling is that, so long as we do continue to benefit, there would be something dishonest about changing the name or removing the statue.

I also think that, if Michelle Codrington feels no need to change her name, we should not change the name of the Library either – and for essentially the same reason: the name is not the exclusive property of one person, but in the course of three centuries has come to mean much more. For her, obviously, it belongs first and foremost to her own family; for us, it is the name of a beautiful building and a cherished institution, both of which come to mind much more readily when it is mentioned than does the man from whom they originally took it.

And I think we should keep the statue, essentially on aesthetic grounds. It is stylistically of a piece with the building, and expresses the classical ideals of its time. Like many works of art, it tells a story which perhaps mingles fact with fiction, and is certainly incomplete. But the answer to that, surely, is not to suppress it but to complete and correct it, so that a fuller and more honest truth is told. Could we not supplement Addison's encomium with a 21st-century inscription, mentioning some facts that he omitted and placing Christopher Codrington in his historical context, as we now understand it?

And while we're about it, could we not also commission a new work of art, which would explicitly commemorate the men and women whose labour supplied Codrington's wealth? A few years ago the College commissioned Benjamin Sullivan's wonderful triptych portraying the staff, thereby implicitly expressing our gratitude to them for the very privileged way of life that we enjoy and which they make possible. The contribution made by slaves in the West Indies was no doubt less direct, but their sacrifice both far greater and far less voluntary. Surely it merits no less acknowledgement.

Those ideas have taken me well into answering my third question - what should we do?

First, without abandoning a name that has come to mean much more to us than just one man who bore it, we can acknowledge that wrong was done; and while preserving something historic and beautiful we can admit that some very ugly things lay behind it.

Second, even if we cannot identify living *individuals* who can credibly be described as victims of one man's actions three centuries ago, we should look for ways of making a more than symbolic *collective* reparation to the descendants of African slaves, both in the West Indies and in this country.

Third, and above all, whatever we think of Codrington's actions in his time, let us try to live up to our own principles in our time, which means being a genuinely open and inclusive community.

It is even possible we might find some actions that would further both those last two aims – perhaps earmarking a research fellowship for work on African or Afro-Caribbean history, or one or more visiting fellowships for scholars from the West Indies; or both.

But those, perhaps, are ideas better discussed in a college meeting than in a sermon…