

Lessons from William Wilberforce – What is your dream?

Hebrews 12:1-3; Matt 5:13-16

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I know that a number of you have seen the film “Amazing Grace” which tells the remarkable story of William Wilberforce’s passion and determination to see the slave trade and slavery abolished. I was stimulated by a talk Nicky Gumble gave at the Alpha Conference I attended recently, I have been surfing the internet and reading and reflecting on the life of William Wilberforce. I want to share with you some of my reflections on the lessons and inspiration we can take from the life of William Wilberforce.

It needs to be said that there were many people involved in the fight for the abolition of slavery, including of course many Africans, of whom the best known was Olaudah Equiano, a former slave from present day Nigeria who was given the name Gustavus Vassa by his first slave master. His story is fascinating in and of itself. He stood tall amongst the abolitionists of his day for his courage, his ingenuity, and also for his writing. He was a bestselling author and was one of the leaders of the anti-slavery campaign.

At the heart of this movement for the abolition of slavery was a group of people who loved Jesus. On 22 May 1787 twelve Christians established themselves as the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and they recruited a young Yorkshire MP by the name of William Wilberforce to lead the campaign in the House of Commons.

So it was not just the work of an individual. This was a community - a community that centred around a church, Holy Trinity, Clapham Common. They were nicknamed the Clapham Sect (you can Google that too) and the Rector of the church was John Venn. They started a movement that mobilised hundreds of thousands of people. Four hundred thousand Britons, particularly women, boycotted slave-grown sugar. In the end there were millions of people who signed petitions to Parliament. But there is one man whose name is particularly associated with the abolition of the slave trade.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams was asked to nominate the greatest Briton of the last 1000 years, he said without hesitation, *“William Wilberforce, because I can’t think of anyone who has changed the lives of so many people for the better.”*

What lessons do we learn from the life of William Wilberforce.

Here are five I want to suggest.

1. Pursue a big dream

*Joshua said to the people, ‘...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’
(Joshua 24 v15)*

We all have one life. It is for each of us to choose how we are going to live it and what we are going to do with it.

I have lived over half my life but I have been arrested and freshly inspired to ask the question – what lasting legacy do I want to leave.

The point is that it is never too late to ask this question, and it is never too early.

What is your big dream?

Joshua said choose to pursue the big vision for your life. Serve the Lord.

Wilberforce was a man who was very gifted. He had a natural charm; he was very amusing; he was quick-witted; he had a good singing voice. But he devoted his early life to having a good time, and to the pursuit of pleasure. He had a good group of friends and they liked to play cards, to gamble, to wine and dine. He belonged to five London clubs. He was a bit of a dilettante.

Then at the age of twenty-one he entered politics. One of close friends who was the same age as him was William Pitt (termed “William Pitt the Younger” by historians if you are Googling him to distinguish him from his father).

On one occasion Pitt and Wilberforce were discussing the future of their careers and Pitt revealed his aspiration to become Prime Minister of Britain and his desire for Wilberforce's support and partnership. Wilberforce said that no one of their age had ever served in Parliament, to which Pitt responded, *‘Which is why we are too young to realise that certain things are impossible, so we will do them anyway.’*

Wilberforce probably could have become prime minister. He didn't. William Pitt did – at the age of 24 became the youngest person ever to serve of Prime Minister of Britain.

But something happened to Wilberforce over a period of months, when he was twenty-five. He describes it as 'The Great Change'. Basically, he fell in love with Jesus Christ. From that moment on, to use his own words, quoting the book of Hebrews, he 'fixed his eyes on Jesus' (Hebrews 12:2).

His relationship with Jesus Christ became the number one priority in his life. A huge change took place in his life and his perspective.

He moved from being self-centred, achievement-centred, politics-centred, to being God-centred - and he did it with a Christ-like joy which distinguished everything that he did.

Nicky Gumble mentioned in a talk he gave on vision at the Alpha Conference that Wilberforce wrote down some 'Resolutions on Temperance':
'No desserts; no tasting; one thing for first course, one for second course; simplicity; moderate in quantity; never more than six glasses of wine.'

Until the age of thirty-eight Wilberforce showed not the slightest interest in women. But then Thomas Babington, one of the Clapham Sect, chose someone for him. He wrote in his diary,
'Babington strongly recommended Miss Spooner as a wife for me.'

Two days later they were introduced, eight days later he proposed and within six weeks they were married. They quickly had six children.

On 28 October 1787 Wilberforce wrote in his diary,
'God Almighty has placed before me two great Objects, the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.'

By 'manners' he didn't mean how you hold your knife and fork, or whether you put your elbows on the table. He meant morals. In his words:
'To help restore the influence of the Christian faith and raise the standard of our nation's morality.'

He wrote a book called *Real Christianity*. They had longer titles in those days and *Real Christianity* is the short one. The actual title was:
A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of the Country, contrasted with Real Christianity.

At the end of that book he says,
'I pray that this might be a land where the name of Jesus Christ would be honoured, and that we might be a place where the rest of the world can look and see the blessings of faithfully following Jesus Christ.'

So what is your big vision? What will give your life to achieve?
What lasting legacy do you want to leave?

I have found asking this question has provoked a stirring in me. God has put me here as leader of Christ Church and I can't believe that God wants Christ Church look as it does now in 5 years time. I don't believe that we are just to

carry on doing what we have always done. I don't believe that God wanted us to remodel our buildings so that we can do what we are doing now with greater ease and efficiency.

No! I have a big dream of seeing Christ Church grow – yes I believe we should grow numerically. I realise that I have made an assumption that we are not meant to grow because our buildings are this size and CT does not need another mega church.

I believe we should be thinking in terms of growing and planting new congregations right here in this building. We could add at least two more services on a weekend. We could plant new congregation – new churches right here without having to find new premises.

My big dream for Christ Church in essence is deeper and wider – deeper discipleship, wider outreach.

I believe God is taking us deeper into the life of Jesus. I see this in all sorts of ways in what God is stirring in us.

I believe God is wanting us reach out wider in sacrificial mission and outreach to desperately needy world.

I could, and will say a lot more about this in due course.
But for me the big dream is - deeper and wider.

So point one – pursue the big dream.

What is your big dream?

Throw off the shackles that have limited what you believe God wants to do through you.

Dream big. Dream bigger!

*Joshua said to the people, ‘...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’
(Joshua 24:15)*

2. Engage with politics

Jesus said, 'You are the salt of the earth ...'You are the light of the world.' (Matthew 5:14)

In other words we are to have an impact on the world around us. As Eugene Petersen puts it in *The Message* we are to *bring out the God-flavours and the God-colours in the world in which we live.*

When I say engage with politics I mean politics with a small “p”. The Greek word “polis” means “city community” – it is about getting involved in the life of our city, the world around us, the issues of our day.

We can be so church minded that we fail to see the wider bigger city, national, continental, world issues. For me the stimulating thing about travel and the trip I have just been able to make is to be amongst people who are engaging with bigger issues that are outside of my narrow domestic and ecclesiastical confines.

I love getting round and visiting members of Christ Church at work and finding out about what they are doing.

This past week I went into **Andre Frieslaar's** office in town. He is a traffic engineer and their firm has been awarded a number of contract to improve public transport in Cape Town including the long over due rebuilding of the M5/N1 interchange and a new dedicated bus tram way from Bellville into the city centre.

You recall that a few weeks ago Jeremy interviewed **Heidi Faught** about her work as a researcher in the field of drug resistant TB. I was delighted to see that she has received the award for the most outstanding young black female scientist in the last 2-5 years by the National Science and Technology Forum.

Bruno Drachen is head of Deafsa and is working to get deaf people in SA united and working for sign language to be recognised as the 12th official language in SA.

I could go on ... this is what I mean by engaging in politics - addressing the needs in our society – and pursuing a dream of our city, our community our country being transformed – be it in the way we travel to work, or our effectiveness in treating TB or speaking up for those who literally are not heard.

Martin Luther King said,

“A person has not started living until they rise above the narrow confines of their own existence, to broader concerns for all of humanity.”

Another person whose name we associate with the Abolition of the Slave Trade is John Newton. He was sea captain, a slave trader who himself was at one time a slave. He found Christ and wrote the hymn, "Amazing Grace".

In his later life he was an Anglican Clergyman in London and strong supporter of the Abolitionists. At a time when Wilberforce was considering leaving Parliament, Newton wrote to him,
"It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His Church and for the good of the Nation."

For what good has God raised you up? What has God put on your heart? What is your holy discontent? What passion – what matter of polis – what political concern in the neighbourhood, the city, the nation, just won't go away?

Maybe you need to feed it. Maybe you need to take steps to feed your discontent. Put yourself in a place, read, travel, expose yourself so that your holy discontent grows.

That is what fuels the big dream.

So point two is get involved in politics.

3. *Speak for the voiceless*

'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.' (Proverbs 31:8 - 9)

There are many different ways of doing that. I must admit I am amazed that there are estimated to be 40,000 police to control the demonstrators pouring into Rostock in Germany to raise issues and protest against what the world's richest nations are doing as their leaders meet for the G8 summit. I don't necessarily endorse their messages or agree with their methods, but I am inspired by their passion and commitment.

There are other ways of speaking up for the voiceless. Letters, petitions, films, documentaries. We will be introducing in our services what I am calling "a green minute" in which we will have a practical thing we can do to address issues of environmental abuse.

Speaking up for the voiceless means we need to look beyond the narrow confines of our own worlds.

That is why I delighted that the Ambassadors met with youth groups from Manenberg last night and will be going to Sweet Homes farm to help people water proof their shacks. This is looking beyond our immediate worlds and our narrow confines.

For Wilberforce it wasn't just the slave trade. His greatest longing in life, once he'd come to experience Jesus, was for his friends to meet Jesus. He longed for Pitt, who was perhaps his closest friend, to grow and come alive in his faith.

He grieved the lack of faith in his long time unbelieving parliamentary friend Charles Fox. He longed, to use his own words, "that I might be the instrument to bring him to the knowledge of Christ!!!"

He supported and led many different causes.

Wilberforce described the state lottery as "a national sin" and he laboured for its abolition as well. It was eventually abolished 1826, but it has come back, hasn't it! It remains a scourge on our society. I will have nothing to do with it and will not accept any lottery money for the projects we run.

This is a reminder to us that battles won need to be won again and again. Freedoms won need to be guarded against renewed onslaughts. The enemy does not take defeat lightly.

But there was one cause which dominated Wilberforce's thinking. Speaking to the House of Commons in May 1789, he said:

"I confess to you, so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made for the Abolition [of slavery]... Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."

By the time the slave trade was abolished in 1807, three million slaves had been transported to the Americas on British ships. British slave traders were carrying 40,000 slaves a year from Africa to the New World.

The mortality rate on those ships could be as high as 40 per cent. People accused him of being a fanatic, to which he replied, *"If to be feelingly alive to the suffering of my fellow creatures, and to be warmed with the desire of relieving their distresses is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever to be permitted at large."*

What – to use Wilberforce’s words “warms a desire in you”?
What gets you hot? What inspires you to be a fanatic?
What voice will you raise? On whose behalf will you speak?

We need more fanatics.
Fanatics about environmental abuse.
Fanatics about child abuse
Fanatics about drug resistant TB
Fanatics about “manners in society” – about moral issues.
Fanatics about poverty and injustice.
My prayer is Lord – raise up more fanatics!

I must throw in here that slavery is not just an issue of 200 years ago. Slavery is an issue for today. According to the United Nations, there are five times as many slaves today as there were in Wilberforce's day.
Around 2.4 million people are bought and sold every year.
It's estimated that 27 million people are enslaved, 8.4 million of them children.
At the dawn of 2007, approximately one child out of every 175 in the world is a slave.

There are plenty of voiceless people in our society and in the world today.

So point three is – speak up for the voiceless.

4. Advance against opposition

'I did not come to bring peace, but a sword... Those who do not take up their cross and follow me are not worthy of me... the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful people lay hold of it.' (Matthew 10:34, 38 & 11:12)

You'd think, wouldn't you, that if you were doing as much good as Wilberforce did with his life, and if you were a peacemaker as he was, everyone would be thrilled. Not at all.

Wilberforce was the most admired man in England, but he was also the most hated man in England. He was attacked because support for the slave trade was so strong. The economy was deeply dependent on it. It was a vested interest. If you invested in the products of the slave trade, you could make a 100 per cent profit on your investment. Opponents also feared the loss of the sugar trade to French competition if the slave trade was abolished.

So for twenty years in his parliamentary struggles, he suffered nothing but defeat, insults, rejection from friends, vilification from his enemies and even threats to his life. He was even charged with inciting insurrection.

Wilberforce - as was his custom - made no reply. He was consistently restrained in the face of this vilification. In fact it kind of bucked him up a bit. He said, "I am rather animated, than discouraged, by it."

John Wesley, who was eighty-seven years of age by this time, saw what Wilberforce was going through and wrote him a little letter to encourage him. He said this:

'Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but if God is with you who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God?'

So advance against opposition.

5. Persevere through disappointment

'...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame... Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.'
(Hebrews 12:1 - 3)

Life is full of disappointments. I look back on my time in the ministry and I can think of a number of times when I worked long and hard to see something achieved. I threw myself heart and soul into projects and invested time and energy in other people. I sacrificed family time, carried on when others said drop it, and there have been times of great disappointment.

That leads us to question whether we should I risk doing it again? Is it worth it? Can I take another disappointment?

(By God's grace there have also been times of real encouragement and a few of satisfying achievement.)

But there will always be those moments of disappointment, when we ask, is it worth carrying on?

Wilberforce suffered disappointment after disappointment.

The doors were slammed in his face again and again. He himself was quite sick, he had weak eyesight and he was plagued with digestive problems. He once said that his life had been little other than a struggle against disease, and disability. At one point, weakened by illness, he weighed a mere 34 kilogrammes.

James Boswell wrote of Wilberforce, getting up to give a election speech...
*'I saw what seemed to be a mere shrimp, mounted upon a table.
But I listened and he grew and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.'*

He survived these setbacks. He was twenty-seven years of age when God called him to the task of abolishing the slave trade. In 1787, he put down the first motion in the House of Commons - and that was defeated. Bills were debated again in 1789, 1791, 1792, 1794, 1796, 1798, 1799. They all failed. The Foreign Slave Bill was passed in 1806; the Abolition of the Slave Trade Bill in 1807. That part of the campaign lasted eighteen years.

Then he devoted his energies to the abolition of slavery itself. In 1825 ill health compelled him to resign as a Member of Parliament, but he continued the campaign from the outside. In 1831 he sent a message to the Anti-Slavery Society, in which he said,

'Our motto must be perseverance. I ultimately trust the Almighty will crown our efforts with success.'

He did. In July 1833, the Abolition of Slavery Bill was passed in both Houses of Parliament. Three days later Wilberforce died.

When the news was conveyed to him on his death bed he said,
"Thank God that I have lived to see the day in which England is willing to give 20 million pounds for the Abolition of Slavery."

"Who for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2).

This was the feature of Wilberforce's life. Involved in something like this, you could become very intense, but he didn't. He was always joyful and had a great sense of humour and fun.

In 1807, when the Abolition of the Slave Trade Bill was passed, his first words were to his abolitionist friend and Clapham landlord, Henry Thornton. He grinned and said, 'Well, Henry, what should we abolish next?'

Conclusion

So William Wilberforce shows us that one person in spite of hardships and setbacks can make a difference. He did not do it alone. He was inspired and sustained in his battle to the end not only by his faith in Jesus, but also by the ongoing encouragement of his community and those who worked with him.

The Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said,
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world, indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”