

Northolt Park Baptist Church (25 March 2007)

5 Minutes on William Wilberforce

On this day – 25 March – in 1807 – 200 years ago, the Abolition Bill was passed, which marked the beginning of the end of the slave trade. This Sunday has been designated Freedom Day, to mark its 200th anniversary. And churches throughout the whole world will be thinking about the horrors of slavery and remembering one person in particular who made a difference, a man called William Wilberforce.

Wilberforce was born in 1759; his father died just before his 9th birthday, and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, who were Christians. As a young man, William was spoiled and selfish, and spent a lot of his time playing poker. He had inherited a large fortune from his father, and was able to gamble as well as wine and dine in fashionable London clubs where he was well known for having a good singing voice!

But he was also interested in politics, and when he was just 21, he spent £8,000 (equivalent to about £250,000 in today's money) on winning a Parliamentary seat in the 1780 general election.

By his own admission, he didn't do much to begin with. But all that changed when he was 25. It changed because he became a changed person, through Jesus. He became a Christian.

He was so changed so much he wanted to leave Parliament and go into the church, but someone advised him to serve God through politics. That someone was John Newton, the former slave ship captain who had become a minister, and who we know best of all as the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*. Newton advised William to remain in Parliament, writing to tell 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.'

It was the slave trade that really concerned Wilberforce, and in 1787 he launched his campaign for abolition. For the first 20 years he suffered humiliation, defeats, insults, rejection from his friends, abuse from his enemies, and even threats on his life. Between 1787 and 1807 (that's 20 years!), he presented 11 bills to abolish the slave trade, and they were voted down 11 times.

It's important to remember that trade in slaves was crucial to the British economy because of the wealth and jobs it created for ports, ship owners, shipbuilders, seafarers, traders, exporters of goods to Africa, and importers of cargo from the West Indies. So, Wilberforce was challenging the economic interests of an entire empire. There was also strong international opposition to Wilberforce from plantation owners and slave traders in America and from West Indian assemblies, which threatened to declare independence from England and join with the United States.

On one of the occasions when a vote was taking place, Wilberforce's opponents had given away free tickets for an opera premiere that was happening on the same evening. The sabotage worked. Wilberforce wrote in his diary: 'My Slave Bill was thrown out by 74 to 70... 10 or 12 of those who had supported me [were] absent in the country, or [away] on pleasure. Enough [were] at the Opera to have carried it.'

Wilberforce became ill; he was emotionally exhausted, and thought of retiring. But John Newton encouraged him to continue, reminding him of Esther who had been put in the palace of the king, and of Daniel who trusted in the Lord, and his enemies didn't get the better of him.

So Wilberforce continued and, supported by others, slowly began to swing opinion around to support the abolitionist cause.

The great breakthrough came in 1807 when, at the 12th attempt, the Bill for Abolition was carried in the House of Commons by a huge majority of 267 votes. A member of Parliament praised him for 'having preserved so many of his fellow creatures', and Wilberforce sat in the middle of loud 'hurrahs' and 'hear hears' with his head bowed, tears streaming down his face.

After 20 years of defeats, with this victory he had changed the course of history. There was still more work to be done, for although the slave *trade* had now been made illegal, slavery itself remained lawful for another 26 years. Wilberforce carried on campaigning, and 3 months before his death he lived to see slavery outlawed by the final piece of legislation, which was passed in 1833.

What was the key to Wilberforce's success? Let's think about two things.

(1) His conversion to Christ

He was an activist who would not give up till he did what he had to do. But the underlying reason why he did what he did was because his heart had been transformed by Jesus and by his faith in Jesus. When he came to faith in Jesus, his attitude towards wealth was changed, and he gave away at least a quarter of his inherited wealth to the poor. And that change of heart motivated his work on behalf of others.

(2) His calling to politics

In Wilberforce's day, like in our own day, politics and faith tended to be kept separate from each other. But for Wilberforce, there was no neat separation between faith and anything else in life. Wilberforce never believed that Christianity was just a set of beliefs which had no bearing on real life.

John Newton helped him here, reminding him that Wilberforce was called to serve God in politics, to work for the good of the nation. And Wilberforce did that, not only with the slave trade, but other things too, like becoming a founder of the RSPCA, and helping to found schools that poor children could go to.

We might not ever see another William Wilberforce, but we can all follow Wilberforce's example, and be men and women, boys and girls, of strong faith in Jesus, and a deep desire to see the gospel make an impact on the lives of men and women in the world. Let's give thanks to God for Wilberforce, and for the 'amazing grace' that saved him and saves us too, and which provides the motivation for our own service to Christ.