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*Archbishop Stephen spoke as part of the presentation about the work being done in response to the Church Commissioners' historic links to transatlantic slavery*

In those days they will no longer say 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Jeremiah 31. 29)

Of course Jeremiah is going on to say that we must all be responsible for our sins. However the terrible legacy of enslavement sets our teeth on edge today; leaves a legacy of racism, inequality and discrimination that is our sin as well, for we continue to live with the knowledge that our church colluded with, encouraged and profited from human enslavement. Our teeth are set on edge: not just with shame, but with the knowledge that enslavement is a reality today, and that we are yet to mend and resolve the contradictions in our theology and our history which enabled this to happen. We must face up to it in order to repair it. This is what the work of the Commissioners begins to enable us to do.

For as the abolitionist debates themselves made clear, we know that Scripture itself is not always consistent on slavery. Paul might write in Galatians 3 that our life in Christ eradicates distinctions between slave or free, but he also tells us that we should treat our slaves kindly, not actually set them free.

Humans were then, and today continue to be, treated as commodities, being owned and traded. This not only falls short of the new humanity we have in Christ, it denies and contradicts it.

I can't help but think of that slave bible, a copy of which is in Lambeth Palace Library – a copy of the scriptures to be used in plantations and removes from the biblical corpus for instance the first 18 chapters of the book of Exodus – a story of exile and return, of liberation from slavery and a precursor to the work of God in Jesus Christ. In fact that slave bible reduces the 1189 chapters of the bible to a mere 232. 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament was removed. Sisters and brothers, there may be contradictions in our tradition, but the big picture of Scripture is clear, so why are we still eating the sour grapes of excuse, prevarication and collusion today.

Even with the great step forward of abolition of slavery did we compensate the enslaved? No we thought freedom was enough and ended up compensating those who had profited from this hideous trade.

The enslavement of others is nothing less than a rupture in the body of Christ. And yet, what we are exploring today in this presentation is forward looking and gloriously hopeful and flows from a reimagined theological vision of what it means to be in Christ and how this works out in all of our lives. For the whole arc of the Christian faith is about repairing rupture, about healing, and about justice – it is about being in Christ and set free to live Christlike lives ourselves.

The work of the Commissioners invites us to build a different future. We cannot compensate those who suffered so much because of our false

and debilitating theologies, but we are invited to face the past honestly (our teeth are on edge), and then in the words of Isaiah 58 which have been so instrumental in guiding the theological vision which underpins this work, repair, heal and at last do justice.

That's what Jeremiah 29 also drives towards: a different future. And Isaiah 58 challenges us to remove the yoke, to share our bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to be like a watered garden and to repair the breach.

Here's a good line for Lent:

'This is the fast the Lord chooses; to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free.' (Isaiah 58. 6)

This is the theological challenge of this work and its outworking in the vision of justice and healing which flow from it.

'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' (Galatians 5.1)

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