

Sermon on Wednesday 16 October by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: 1 Timothy 1. 8-11 and 6. 1-4

Blind spots?

Last week, I went to the "Silk Roads" exhibition at the British Museum. It was very interesting but very crowded. If you want to go, maybe leave it a couple of months.

It was about the whole network of trading routes in early medieval times. One of the points it made was that among the silk and other commodities traded along these routes were slaves.

Slavery has been a nearly universal feature of human history.

The ancient Chinese Empire had slaves.

Ancient Athens got much of its wealth from the silver mines at Laurion which were worked by slave labour.

The Roman Empire depended on slaves.

In England, there were slaves before the Norman Conquest and serfs for centuries afterwards.

And in the reign of Charles the Second, Barbary pirates from

north Africa raided the south coast and seized English people for slaves.

In Russia, a significant proportion of the native-born population were serfs until 1861.

Arabs traded slaves across the Sahara and up and down the coast of East Africa.

Europeans shipped slaves across the Atlantic, leading to the well-documented slave systems in the USA and Caribbean.

Brazil, the country with the most slaves of all, did not abolish slavery until 1888.

Legend has it that Pope Gregory the Great was in the slave market in Rome some time in the 590s; he saw some young English slaves, and being told that they were "Angli" ("English") said "non Angli sed angeli" ("not Angles but angels"), or at least they would be if they were Christians. Whereupon he was moved to send Augustine on a mission to convert England.

A happy outcome for the English, but what on earth was Gregory doing allowing a slave market in his city?

Which raises the question – why did the Christian church take so long to recognise the wrongness of slavery? Maybe self-interest; maybe intellectual indolence; maybe because it was something that had always been there; and maybe because the Bible does not speak against it.

The Bible was written at a time when slavery was normal.

The Old Testament allowed slavery - including making slaves of defeated enemies and providing for people to sell themselves into slavery to cancel debt - but also regulated against the worst excesses.

The New Testament, as a whole, seems to accept slavery as part of the background. And the New testament Greek word for slave - *doulos* - is ambiguous as it can also mean a servant.

Slaves were members of the church, as were slave owners. Paul's Letter to Philemon, a slave owner, was to ask him to give freedom to Onesimus, not as a matter of principle but to oblige Paul.

But the Bible is full of surprises, even if you think you know it quite well.

I had one of those surprises at Morning Prayer on Monday when the reading was from 1 Timothy. The passage ranked "slave traders" with really bad sinners like perjurers or those who murder their parents.

I had never noticed these words before and went home and checked them. And surely, I thought, the King James Bible would not use those words given the congregations who might hear them. But they are there, using the word "menstealers". The Greek means kidnappers, but the main reason for kidnapping people was to sell them into slavery, so "slave traders" is a fair rendering.

And then turn to Chapter 6. Having in Chapter 1 condemned those who make people slaves, the Epistle explicitly urges those who are the victims of slavery to accept their lot, especially if

they have a Christian master.

This seems a strange ethical compromise, but it was the position of the British parliament between 1807, when slave trading was outlawed, and 1833, when it passed the Act abolishing slavery throughout the empire.

And the whole process suggests that we today ought to ask – are there things which we take for granted or which suit us very well, which will be recognised in time as contrary to God's will? Are there areas where, for whatever reason, our consciences are dulled?