

Most of you will know that, before moving to Milton Keynes, for 5 years we lived in Bristol. And the poshest part of Bristol, which was not that far from where we lived, is Clifton (home to suspension bridge and world's oldest zoo). Clifton was mostly built in the 18th century at the height of Bristol's wealth, and it is beautiful. Street after street of large, well appointed town-houses, and at the heart of it the fabulous parish church of Christchurch.

To this day, it has the largest Anglican congregation in Bristol, but you can imagine back in its heyday, large numbers of prosperous Georgian families walking to the Sunday service, and then back to their large family home to be served roast lunch by the staff.

But there's a reason why Clifton is built where it is. It is in fact fairly close to the town centre, and is right next to the River Avon, and just a mile from the historic docks in the centre of Bristol (that's why the Suspension Bridge is in Clifton.)

There's also a reason why Bristol was so wealthy in the 18th century. For 30 years in the middle of the century it was the centre of the British slave trade. That's where its money came from, and that is the money that built the stunning streets of Clifton. Wealthy slave-owning families lived there because it was close to their commercial headquarters in the docks but also far enough away at the top of the gorge that they couldn't see or smell it when they were at home.

Bristol was ultimately responsible for the transportation of half a million slaves – bigger than its population even now. The wealthiest family of all – who naturally lived in Clifton – was the Colston family, who gave a good chunk of their wealth to the city, and whose patriarch Thomas Colston, still stands on a plinth near the docks. You can walk along Colston Way to visit Colston Hall, and there are 3 Colston Schools.

And it staggers me to think of all these pious families, including the Colstons, walking to church every Sunday, singing their hymns, praying their prayers & *completely ignoring the implications of what they were doing in the week.*

It's *that* kind of attitude which this passage is talking about. The idea of relegating our faith to a bit of pious activity seeking God's blessing on a Sunday (or Saturday in the case of the Jewish people) and then ignoring His commands and living how we wanted the rest of the week. And the passage is fairly candid about what God thinks of that!

And we too might be horrified that 18th cent. people who called themselves Christians could be so comfortable with the misery inflicted by slavery. But we do have to ask ourselves the question: is there anything in our lifestyles now where we are equally blind? What might be our 'slavery' issue, the one that Christians in 250 years time can't believe that we were so casual about?

Cafe: I'll leave that provocative thought with you, but I will make the general observation that the bible knows nothing of private religion. Worship is a 24/7 activity – we worship God in the world as well as in church. Faith *works* – it is lived out in loving obedience to God's commands, Monday to Saturday – in our homes, in our schools and workplaces, in the global economy, across the world. Which begs the important questions:

What are the issues on *your* heart? Where is God calling us to a 'true fast'? And what blessings might we enjoy if we committed ourselves to this kind of lifestyle? These are the questions we'll spend a few minutes considering...

BCP: My personal view is that our attitude towards the environment and stewardship of creation *is* that issue. And we can look at the news this week and we may feel nothing but contempt for Extinction Rebellion, we may agree with Boris Johnson in his description of them as 'unco-operative crusties' – but I read the science and look at how far short of the targets we need to hit and wonder if their desperation is right,

that perhaps they are the prophets of our day. Remember that prophets were usually despised, they were the doom-mongers that everybody else thought were over-reacting.

But even if you feel more confident about the future of our planet than I do, there are other issues where you might long to see the streams of justice flow: child poverty, bonded labour, human trafficking, trophy hunting – to name but a few.

Our calling remains the same as it was for the people of God in Isaiah's day. We are to be those who loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, who set the oppressed free, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless.

The greatest challenge for us is that much of this injustice is hidden from us. We don't see the people who make our clothes or our mobile phone. When Western financial markets drive up the price of wheat or drive down the price of chocolate or coffee, we don't see the families who go hungry.

But the answer is not to feel guilt. This is a good world and God provides abundance for our enjoyment. The answer is to know the few places where we *can* make a difference. What are the issues on your heart? Where is God calling you to a 'true fast'? How can your mustard seed grow into something wonderful?

And (as we reflect on this thought) the encouragement is that we do this not just for others, as the text makes clear, but also for ourselves. If we want to know the blessing of God, he gives it to those who seek the wellbeing of others: READ v8-9a. And it gets better: READ v11.

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And may God grant us grace to be those who walk the talk, who lead lives of consistent integrity, freedom-bringers drawing from the spring whose waters never fail. Amen.