

Righting Past Wrongs!

Deuteronomy 30^{15-end}; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14²⁵⁻³³

*I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.
[Philemon⁹]*

Although Christians have worshipped on this site for a millennium or more, this building was only 30 years old when Sentia Smith, Queen of the Gypsies, was buried in the Churchyard in January 1907 (probably buried in the same grave where Esau, King of the Gypsies was buried in 1901). The entries are in the burial registers, but no-one has the faintest idea where the grave or graves are. The perspectives of the time was different - in this Churchyard, where so many were able to make an ostentatious display their influence and wealth (particularly those buried at the top of the hill) - and it may have been that those considered superior at that time were squeamish about being buried next to Black Patch Gypsies.

If you want some evidence of how things have changed for the better we have Dr Bradshaw, the High Sheriff with us today. Ted Rudge's book, *Brumroamin*, records that it was his predecessor as High Sheriff, Mr R Heath, who in July 1905 took the lead in the eviction of the Gypsies from the Black Patch (although Henty Smith was allowed to remain on the land for another 2 years until she died).

In many ways this service is about righting past wrongs.

It has been a privilege to work together with Ted Rudge and the Romany Gypsy Association in getting this memorial erected - from our perspective, trying the right some of the wrongs in the past. Since 1514, when Gypsies were first mentioned in Britain, they have suffered stigma and persecution - both King Henry VIII and Queen Mary made being a Gypsy an offence punishable by death (although from 1540 Gypsies in a much more enlightened Scotland were allowed to live by their own rules).

I am not sure what the views of my predecessors were - the Eton educated, the Ven Robert Hodgson, who was also Archdeacon of Stafford or the Cambridge theologian, Preb Dr Andrew Burn, later Dean of Salisbury, Rectors of Handsworth at the time of the funerals of Esau and Henty - but it is good that the Church, the City and the County come together to pay honour now.

Times may have changed, but the message of the Church, the faith based on Jesus, would (or should) never have allowed that anyone was treated differently - that was a simple denial of our faith.

- ✦ **All Are Equal Under God** - the Book of Common Prayer service for the Burial of the Dead is a masterpiece (and this is the service that would have been used for all 35 of those we remember today); it focuses on the sinfulness of all humanity and the glory of the resurrection of Christ in which we find our hope. There is no possibility in that service for anyone - great, good or otherwise - to have a eulogy: neither is there any place for the name of the person to feature - it is enough that they are known to God (and if you didn't know who they were you wouldn't be at the funeral).
- ✦ **The Possibility of Change** - Philemon is one of those great stories in the New Testament. Paul meets a runaway slave, Onesimus, in prison and just happens to know his owner. Paul points out that because the owner and the slave are both now Christians they are equal in Christ. Paul is sending the slave back to his master with the letter asking that that master sends Onesimus back to Paul because he needs him, using all the leverage he can apply. He says he could **command** Philemon's obedience but says too, **I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love**. As Christians we don't stand on the law for equal opportunities for all who gather in this place, but stand on inequality created by love: the one thing that unites us as we try to live out Jesus' example.
- ✦ **The True Leveller** - the cross of Christ. If any community understands hatred it is the Gypsy community and Jesus words here - if you cannot hate your family you cannot be my disciple - seem very strong. It can be explained a little by looking at the original: *to love less* or *to put aside*. Jesus says this because he knows that the way of the cross is hard, yet it is the cross equals us all: equal in our need of God and of grace; equal in our struggle against evil; equal in our struggle to live the lives God demands that we live; equal in our hope of God's resurrection. That is worthy of giving up possessions and wise too - for we know that we will have to leave them all anyway. The currency of heaven is not gold or cheques but love and justice.

We come from different situations and with very different perspectives, but here, under God, in life and in death, we stand equal.

Some might see the dedication today as a righting past wrongs, and it is! That is what the Church stands for and what we believe and proclaim. For us as individuals and as communities - new beginnings made possible by God's grace.