

Monday 11th January 2021

Mary Slessor, Missionary in West Africa 1915

Dear Friends

If, like me, you know little of the Victorian lady shown here whose commemoration falls today, then I recommend a visit to <http://maryslessor.org/mary-slessor/>.

Mary Slessor was a woman well ahead of the culture in which she was born. Becoming a Christian as a teenager, at 28 she left Scotland to become a missionary in West Africa. Her approach – rooted in humility and a desire to understand local languages and culture – led her eventually to become the local British Vice-Consul, a first for a woman of her day. She was enormously respected by indigenous and colonial residents alike.



At the heart of Mary Slessor's approach must have been the commitment (and the skill) to listen well to people different to herself. And underlying this, a fundamental belief in the equality of all people in the sight of God, regardless of background.

When our minds and hearts turn to the turmoil currently tearing the United States apart, it is as well to learn from Mary Slessor. The temptation to say: "we told you so, this was always going to end in tears"; is at best unhelpful. The healing needed in the US – and let's be honest, it's needed here too for slightly different reasons – is only going to come about if people are going to step up and be prepared to accept responsibility for mistakes made and hurt caused. That can only happen if we listen to one another and feel, not just hear, the pain of those affronted.

Turning to COVID19, it is wonderful that the vaccines are being rolled out as quickly as possible. This cannot hide the truth however, that the virus has made the social and economic divisions in our country even worse. Whether you are vulnerable to the virus is not simply a question of health, but also of economics, housing, employment... The socially advantaged are considerably more protected from the virus whether or not they have a vaccination.

Christians have a responsibility, a duty even, to speak out about these divisions that literally limit life opportunities for some of God's children, our brothers and sisters, for reasons over which they have no control. If the only employment opportunity you have places you at greater risk of contracting the virus and at the same time you are living in overcrowded, poor housing, then Christ is affronted, not simply our consciences.

The connection between this and Mary Slessor's missionary zeal might seem tenuous. But it's not. There is an enormous missionary task to be undertaken in this country which must, if it is to be successful, be rooted in listening to the experiences of people and then being prepared to be affected by those experiences sufficiently to call politicians to account and effect change.

One of the great gifts of the Church of England to this country is the parish system; a Christian presence in every community. One weakness of this however (and there are many weaknesses!) is that it encourages us to be truly parochial, even congregational, in our focus. Added to this, is the challenge that our church buildings are no longer necessarily in the right geographical position to meet the greatest missionary needs of the town. We end up being stretched to look after our churches and halls with little energy left for the missionary task in our neighbourhood which increasingly isn't on our doorstep anyway.

A big subject that isn't going to be sorted by a pastoral letter, but which might, perhaps, be committed to prayer.

Which brings me to Lent. It is but a month and a bit away! How might you spend Lent this year? With a little additional reading, study and prayer perhaps?

Alongside this letter is a sheet bearing details of some recommended reading – all of which is available for sale from me (second hand) in return for a minimum £3 donation to NewStarts.

Lent – like Advent – is a wonderful season for reflection and renewal. Used well it can mark a wonderful start to Spring, and the joys of summer to come.

As always, these letters come with my love and prayers. Have a blessed week.

David

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