

Silent Reflections

28th July 2026

Am I Not a Man and a Brother?



Medallion created by Josiah Wedgwood as part of the anti-slavery campaign, 1787.

In July 2010, the General Synod of the Church of England added a new Lesser Festival to the church's Calendar of Saints. The festival commemorates "William Wilberforce, social reformer, Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson, anti-slavery campaigners". Let's meet the three of them.

William Wilberforce (24 August 1759 – 29 July 1833)



Portrait of William Wilberforce by Anton Hickel, 1794.

William Wilberforce was a Yorkshire MP. Although he was an Independent, and so was able to support either Tory or Whig policies according to his conscience, he was a friend of the sometime Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger.

Wilberforce was brought up as a non-conformist, but in 1785 he became an Anglican after having undergone a profound religious experience, which ignited in him a lifelong concern for social reform not just the abolition of slavery.

In the late 18th Century, the Test Act was in place. This required that all MPs were able to receive Holy Communion in accordance with the rites of the Church of England, thus barring both Roman Catholics and non-conformists from being MPs. The abolitionist movement had been founded by Quakers who had unsuccessfully petitioned parliament in 1783. In 1787, Wilberforce was contacted by Thomas Clarkson and others who sought his help with the abolitionist cause. This was more successful, as Wilberforce made his first speech in support of the movement in 1789 (it would have been earlier had he not been taken ill in 1788).

Wilberforce's campaigning within parliament was hard fought over many years. The first success was the passing of the Slave Trade Act on 1st May 1807. The abolitionists continued to fight for the cause and the ultimate success was the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act on 26th July 1833. Wilberforce died just three days after the Act was passed.

Olaudah Equiano (c1745 – 31 March 1797)



Portrait of Olaudah Equiano by Daniel Orme, 1789.

Olaudah Equiano was known for most of his life as Gustavus Vassa (being forced to take this name, after the Swedish King, by one of his early owners). It is assumed that he was born in Southern Nigeria, enslaved as a child and transported to Barbados. This is certainly the picture presented in his autobiographical work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oaludah Equiano* but some doubt the authenticity of this account.

Equiano was repeatedly sold as a slave: slaves were treated as a commodity. In consequence, he was moved from place to place according to the wishes of his owners. There are records that indicate he spent time in South Carolina. One such record is of his baptism in 1759.

Through the kindness and encouragement of his final owner, a Quaker merchant, Equiano was able to earn sufficient money to buy his freedom in 1766. He found it dangerous to continue to live as a freedman in the British colonies and so he moved to London.

It was while living in London that Equiano became a leading figure in the abolitionist movement through the 1780s. However, he did not stay in London – he moved to Soham in Cambridgeshire where he married in 1792. He and his wife had two daughters. His wife died in 1796 and Equiano died a year later.

The Interesting Narrative, which was published in 1789, proved very popular – it went through nine editions during his lifetime. Its success is credited with helping with the passage of the 1807 Slave Trade Act through parliament.

Thomas Clarkson (28 March 1760 – 26 September 1846)



Portrait of Thomas Clarkson by Carl Frederik von Breda, 1788.

Thomas Clarkson was instrumental in passing the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and campaigned for the abolition of slavery worldwide. He was ordained as a Deacon in 1783 but was never priested.

While a student at Cambridge University, Clarkson entered a competition for writing an essay (in Latin!) on the subject *Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?* He undertook a great deal of research for this essay which brought him into contact with leading abolitionists. He also read first-hand reports of the slave trade. His efforts were rewarded, as his essay won the competition prize. Shortly after this, he had what he called a spiritual revelation from God that led to him devoting the rest of his life to the abolitionist cause.

Clarkson translated the essay into English and published it as a pamphlet. The pamphlet was well received and brought him into contact with leading abolitionists.

Clarkson was one of the founding members of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787. The committee approached William Wilberforce, known to be one of the few parliamentarians sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. This led to a fruitful collaboration between Clarkson and Wilberforce with Clarkson tasked with gathering evidence. This was dangerous work: on a trip to Liverpool he was nearly killed by a gang of sailors paid to assassinate him. It was Clarkson who introduced Olaudah Equiano to others in the group.

Following the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 and the death of Wilberforce, Clarkson continued to campaign for abolition focusing his attention on the USA.

William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson were all motivated to work for the abolitionist cause through their faith.

As mentioned above, Clarkson had a revelation shortly after winning the prize in the essay competition. He wrote the following account of this:

“As it is usual to read these essays publicly in the senate house soon after the prize is adjudged, I was called to Cambridge for this purpose. I went and performed my office. On returning however to London, the subject of it almost wholly engrossed my thoughts. I became at times very seriously affected while upon the road. I stopped my horse occasionally, and dismounted and walked. I frequently tried to persuade myself in these intervals that the contents of my Essay could not be true. The more however I reflected upon them, or rather upon the authorities on which they were founded, the more I gave them credit. Coming in sight of Wades Mill in Hertfordshire, I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought came into my mind, that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end. Agitated in this manner I reached home. This was in the summer of 1785.”

By coincidence (or perhaps not?) it was also in 1785 that Wilberforce underwent a life-changing religious conversion.

According to *The Interesting Narrative*, the many challenges that Equiano endured led him to question his faith. Notwithstanding this, at the end of the work he wrote, quoting Micah 6:8:

“After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God?'”

Unfortunately, slavery is still with us in the form of Modern Slavery. Just in the UK, there are thousands of people who have lost their freedom and are forced to undertake demeaning work. Such practices are widespread and hidden in plain view. Many groups are working to support those trapped in this way. As an example, if you are not familiar with it, I commend the work done by the Clewer Initiative – an organisation initiated by a group of Anglican nuns with the purpose of campaigning against Modern Slavery.

For reflection

1. William Wilberforce steered the campaign for the abolition of slavery from his first speech in 1789 through the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 to the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. He had the patience and energy to campaign despite years of determined opposition.

Which injustices have stirred your spirit to call for lasting change? How do you show commitment to, and support for, these causes?

2. What does it mean to you to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God?