

A Blessing and a Limp

Rev Margaret, 2 August 2026

Matthew 14:1-21 & Genesis 32:22-31

William Wilberforce is remembered in the Anglican calendar on July 30 – just a few days ago. If Anglicans were inclined to have patron saints, I think we would make Wilberforce the patron saint of politicians.¹ Here in Australia's capital, I think it is good to remind ourselves of Christian politicians from history who have devoted their lives to just causes.

Wilberforce is remembered for his leadership of the political movement to end the Atlantic slave trade and eradicate slavery in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He described his political motivation with these words:

*"So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the [slave] trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."*²

An enormous, dreadful evil had engulfed the world, and he could not rest until it was defeated. And he did not rest. He kept presenting Abolition Bills to the British Parliament and finally got the numbers to get it passed just three days before he died.

In our Genesis reading this morning, we find Jacob wrestling with God through the night and then moving on with a blessing and a limp.

- Like Jacob, Wilberforce fought through the night of repeated political defeat, against legal, economic, and even biblical arguments in favour of slavery. He persevered through death threats from slave traders and refused to give up until the blessing had been given.
- Like Jacob, Wilberforce sustained wounds in the fight. In his case, it was bouts of deep depression and an extremely painful illness for which he was prescribed laudanum (a polite name for opium), which gave him hallucinations and a medically prescribed addiction.³

We often make the mistake of thinking that people who are blessed by God have an easier life than the rest of us, or that disability, illness or poverty indicate a lack of blessing. Often people who meet God leave the encounter with a limp – with a new life that is more meaningful and more difficult.

- Like Jacob becoming Israel, Wilberforce gained a new name through this conflict. In his youth he was known as a charming, lazy, entitled rich kid. A lad. A nepo baby. After his night of struggle, he came to be called a statesman-saint and a humanitarian reformer.
- And like Israel, his daybreak came, and with it a blessing for the whole world.

An obvious difference is that Jacob was wrestling with God whereas Wilberforce was battling against a social evil. But...

¹ Of course, Thomas Moore (Roman Catholic patron saint of politicians) is also a good choice!

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2008/08/william-wilberforce/>

³ I can't really say that his political battles caused those illnesses, but the stress of this battle certainly contributed to his ill health.

I wonder if any of you have found, like me, that to some extent all our battles involve nights of wrestling with God? Maybe God says: "Look at that terrible thing that is happening. I want you to do something about it." And we say, "Me? I don't think so! What could I do? The problem is too big! The stakes are too high! Smarter people than me have tried and failed!" Isn't that how just about every prophet in the Hebrew Bible reacted when God called them? That was how Wilberforce reacted and it was only after a few years of wrestling with God that he threw himself into the cause of ending slavery.

In our own small ways, we also wrestle with God and we wrestle with ourselves and we battle evil through the darkest nights until sometimes, like for Wilberforce and Jacob (now called Israel) the sun rises on a morning of blessing.

Of course, that sunrise wasn't the end of the story – for Israel, for Wilberforce, or for any of us. The story of God's plan to bless the world through Israel's family would wind through many dark nights and bright mornings before arriving at its climax in Jesus – in the darkest night and the brightest morning.

And as for the story of slavery: it took another 32 years after Britain's legislation before slavery was abolished in the US, where so many Africans kidnapped by British traders had been sold.

And as for other parts of the British Empire... In Australia, though use of the word, "Slave", was carefully avoided, many indigenous and Islander adults and children were forced into unpaid farm and domestic labour up until at least the mid-twentieth century.

And human trafficking still happens on a heartbreaking scale wherever people are vulnerable.

I don't think Wilberforce was naïve enough to think that legislation would bring about the absolute end of slavery. But what he did know was that God had placed him in a unique position to fight *that* particular battle on *that particular* front. Because of the family he was born into and the gifts he was born with, he was a natural politician. This was his calling – his battle to fight. For many of us, political life is not our calling or our battle, but something else is.

"You have to pick your battles", we tell each other, and we usually put the emphasis on "pick". We mean that you can't change everything and need to decide on one or two causes to fight for. There's wisdom in that, but maybe we should put the emphasis on "your". "You have to pick YOUR battles" – the ones you are particularly called to and gifted for.

And maybe it isn't until after a night of wrestling that we know ourselves well enough to name our calling and set out on that adventure.

Then there is bound to be opposition. Once he began, Wilberforce's enemies attacked his position with a pragmatic argument:

*"The impossibility of doing without slaves in the West Indies will always prevent this traffic being dropped. The necessity, the absolute necessity, then, of carrying it on, must, since there is no other, be its excuse."*⁴

They couldn't manage without slavery. Industry would fail. The economy would fall apart. These may have been realistic fears, but such arguments from scarcity should never have moved people who had read the Gospels. Jesus feeding 5,000 is one of very few stories that are found in all four Gospels. The stories that are repeated in Matthew, Mark, Luke and

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2008/08/william-wilberforce/>

John are absolutely central to the Jesus story – things like Jesus's trial, execution and empty tomb. So this miraculous meal is very, very important! And both Matthew and Mark place this account right after the grizzly story of Herod's murder of John the Baptist at a banquet.

Here we find two banquets placed side by side. At one, there is an exclusive guest list, lavish food, entertainment and a constant flow of alcohol, followed by exploitation, manipulation and violence.

There couldn't be a sharper contrast between that meal and the one Jesus provided: 5,000 nobodies, plus women and children, who didn't even rate inclusion in the nobody count. These people would never get an invitation to one of Herod's banquets, even as catering staff.

They were desperate people who wouldn't let Jesus get away; people who needed healing, people who needed a leader who was on their side, people who were hungry – for justice and for food. Readers often criticise them for forgetting to bring food with them. They probably didn't forget. They were probably day-labourers lived from day to day. Taking a day out of work to follow Jesus meant a day that they didn't get paid; a day that they didn't eat.

These were people who knew all about scarcity. It was their daily reality. But they also had an inkling that there was something more important than filling their tummies.

And Jesus saw their need and their hope and had compassion.

We can see, though, that Jesus didn't really want them there. He had just heard of the violent death of his cousin and mentor and he needed alone time. He went out to a deserted place to give himself space to grieve.

But as soon as he got there, he found an enormous crowd of desperate people waiting for him. And he didn't lose his temper. He didn't run away. I sometimes think that is a greater miracle than feeding them all!

Jesus had compassion. And that desperate crowd got to see what Jesus can do with scarcity.

He took what they had, which was far from sufficient, blessed it and had his disciples distribute it. And the people were all filled. All they had brought to Jesus was their emptiness. And they went away filled.

Which is all very nice, but what do we do with that story when we look at the deep needs of our world, and the evil that continues to be done in the name of scarcity?

I would like to say that Jesus will always literally turn our few loaves and fish into a feast for thousands. But if that were true, Christian people would have ended world hunger centuries ago.

So, what *do* we draw from this passage as we approach the deep needs in our world, and confront the fear of scarcity that excuses evils like slavery?

Firstly, this story gives us a glimpse of the ultimate future when we will all sit, on equal terms, at the banquet of God where all will be filled. Scarcity will not have the last word. Abundance will.

Even if we die empty, we will rise to a sumptuous banquet.

And we remember that every time we celebrate Holy Communion.

Until then we have a choice in the face of scarcity. Those two banquets give us two models. We can be like Herod, or we can be like Jesus:

We can fill ourselves with good things, use people for our pleasure and dismiss those who get in our way.

OR we can choose compassion, give thanks for what we have, bless it and give it to those who need it more. And then let God take care of what happens next.

I need to constantly challenge my attitude to the scarcity of time. "Why are there never enough hours in the day?!" When I hear myself say that I try to remember to reply that every hour I have is a gift from God to be received with gratitude. And if I lift up those few hours, bless them, and give them – as far as I can tell - to the people and tasks that need them most, then my attitude to time is transformed, even if I still don't get everything done.

Wilberforce's opponents saw human labour as a scarce resource for them to grasp and exploit. Wilberforce, as a follower of Jesus, saw labourers as human beings to be honoured and respected no matter how much work was needed.

Hands that grasp on to what we have in fear of scarcity will inevitably become fists that brutalise others. Hands that are open can receive whatever good comes to us, give thanks to God for it, however much or little it is, bless it, and share it with others.

As so this week may your limited resources, in your compassionate hands and with God's blessing, be enough for you *and* for those who need them even more than you do.

Amen