

National Trust Report on Colonialism and Historic Slavery

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What do these National Trust properties have in common: Cotehele; Godolphin; Lanhydrock, and Trengwainton Garden?

Yes, they're all in Cornwall and, according to a report published by the National Trust earlier this month, they all have links with colonialism and historic slavery.

The Black Lives Matter protests earlier this year gave impetus to many organisations reviewing their historic connections with racism. This has led to much debate about how we should relate to the past. Should we remove statues of certain public figures? Should we leave artefacts as they are but seek to present them differently? If I take pleasure in the grandeur of Trengwainton Garden, does that make me complicit in the sins of a former owner who also owned Jamaican plantations that had slaves?

These issues are complex. But there's one issue which is actually quite clear. All that feverish debate and soul searching is predicated on the simple idea that (in the words of the American Declaration of Independence) "all men are created equal."

History shows us that this is a lesson that we're depressingly slow to learn. We humans have a proclivity to gravitate towards people who are like us and distrust (and exclude, vilify or persecute) people who we perceive as being different.

This is why we need to hear the biblical message that all men are, indeed, equal, and they're equal precisely because they've been created equal. Historically, this biblical conviction sowed the seeds for the development of human rights. The authors of the National Trust report may not realise it, but they were working in the conceptual framework handed down to us by the Bible.

So, where does that leave me when I visit those National Trust properties? It's important to bring to mind the historic abuses of power that are connected with such places, some of them, no doubt, done misguidedly "in the name of God."

But I'm glad that this report shows us that, today, there are many who are doing their bit to help us move, slowly and falteringly, towards a better society, a society that looks with horror on the evils of the past and desires to exemplify what we see most clearly in the life of Jesus: equal regard for every human being.

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