

*William Wilberforce
and All Social Reformers*

July 29

William Wilberforce was born into a Yorkshire merchant's family in 1759 in Hull. He had a fine mind but did not enjoy good health. He was educated at St John's College, Cambridge. Left enough money for an independent income, he was elected to parliament in 1780 at the age of twenty-one. He came under the influence of John Newton, the evangelical divine. On a visit to Europe in 1784, he was converted to evangelical Christianity and a more serious and responsible way of life than he had led at university. He gave some thought to ordination, but was persuaded by his friends to continue his work in parliament, though he declined all preferments.

His abilities as a speaker made parliament a very suitable setting for him to pursue his aims. In parliament he became a close friend and supporter of William Pitt the Younger, who was Prime Minister from 1784 to 1801 and again from 1804 to 1806. Wilberforce eventually resigned from parliament in 1825 because of ill health.

In 1797 Wilberforce moved to Clapham, and there became a member of the Clapham Sect, a highly influential evangelical group, which included John Venn, the rector of Clapham. Also in 1797 Wilberforce published his *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*. In this popular work he established his position as a leading evangelical.

Wilberforce used his considerable influence to organise and legislate for his perception of a Christian society. He gave generous support to Hannah More and her charitable and educational work, and he helped found the Church Missionary Society and the Bible Society. In common with other evangelicals, he wished to see Sunday more devoted to religious observance and was a keen advocate of moral reform. In the turbulent years after the French Revolution and in the period of the Napoleonic Wars, Wilberforce's concern for constitutional order led him to support some of Pitt's repressive legislation. However, he also supported some moderate proposals for the reform of parliament and was in favour of the removal of the restrictions on Catholics in England. Above all, he became concerned with the evils of slavery and the slave trade, a trade which earned many a fortune in England and America.

Negro slaves were useful on the plantations of tobacco, sugar cane and cotton, and survived longer than the Highlanders and bondsmen, who had been worked to death in the fields. Tobacco and sugar were shipped to England, beads to Africa, and slaves, packed in as closely as possible, to America. Many of the slaves, treated worse than cattle, died on the voyage. On arrival they were deliberately broken in spirit and had no hope of earning their freedom. Wilberforce, despite his failing health and strength, agitated for an end to this. Gradually he persuaded others of the disgraceful nature of the slave trade, and became vice-president of the Anti-Slavery Society. With his considerable eloquence and charm he worked on public opinion until the ordinary people of Britain were won over to his views. The slave trade was ended in 1807.

The Emancipation Bill putting an end to slavery in the British dominions was not passed until August 1833, a month after Wilberforce's death on 29 July. Wilberforce was recognised as a strong influence for good in the nation and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

For Liturgical Use

William Wilberforce was born in 1759 and, after studies at Cambridge, entered parliament in 1780. He was converted to evangelical Christianity in 1784 and became an important

spokesman for evangelical ideas. He promoted education, missions and moral reform. The trade in slaves soon drew his attention, and he attacked slavery and the slave trade vigorously. Acts of Parliament in 1807 finally abolished the trade in slaves. It was not until 1833, a month after Wilberforce's death, that the Emancipation Act freed slaves in all British territories. Wilberforce was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Sentence

The Lord is near to those who are broken-hearted; the Lord saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:18

Collects

God of justice,
you raised up your servant William Wilberforce
to bring liberty to slaves and captives
and to free the oppressed;
strengthen our resolve to defend the poor
and uphold the cause of those who have no helper;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

Free, eternal Spirit,
you lead us to seek justice for all;
you enabled William and his friends
to win emancipation for slaves;
give us the courage to free those
whom our own society enslaves.

Psalms

22:22-31

102:12-22

Readings

Zechariah 8:9-12

Galatians 3:23-28

John 13:2-5,12-17

Restoration with justice

In Christ all are equal

The footwashing

Post Communion Sentence

Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Mark 10:44