

Slave Trade

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The following report appeared in the Guardian of March 24.

They came trudging up the hill from a soggy Epping Forest, a rag-tag huddle led by a young black woman. Behind her were five middle-aged white men and a 15 year old boy, looped together by a length of chain. Around the necks of the boy and a man in his 60s was a makeshift wooden yoke that twisted the man's head as they walked. Each of them, including a clutch of children running alongside – but not the black walkers – wore a T-shirt with the stark legend: "So sorry".

For the past seven years, members of this group, from the evangelical Christian group Lifeline, have been walking around the planet apologising for abuses against Africa, particularly slavery.

Tomorrow sees the culmination of their latest expedition, a 24-day hike from Hull to London to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the British parliamentary vote to outlaw the slave trade. They have apologised to the vice-president of the Gambia, and to a descendant of Kunta Kinte, the slave made famous in the Alex Haley epic Roots, to Senegalese and Ghanians and Barbadians, taking every opportunity, on their knees if necessary, to say sorry to anyone who will listen.

Is it morally appropriate for Lifeline to go around apologising like this? Are the members of Lifeline personally or corporately guilty of anything? Who are they speaking for? Themselves? Their forebears? The churches? The nation? Who? And who do we appropriately apologise to? These are complex issues and the further we get away from the wrongs to be apologised for the more complicated it gets.

Clearly we are not responsible for, or guilty of, acts we have not done, or in which we have not been directly involved. At the same time, we belong to groups, communities and nations that have done things which were wrong, in the distant or more immediate past. Our history has often imposed suffering on others and often brought benefits to ourselves. We cannot run away from this history and its consequences, for we are caught up in it, even if we are not personally guilty. There is an inter-generational aspect of suffering which has to be taken into account. The past affects present realities and relationships. Thus there is a solidarity in sin, which involves the living and the dead. We inherit from the past.

Of course there is a complexity about issues in relation to group injustices. There is the issue of whether and to what extent present institutions and governmental actors are responsible for the past. However, the fact of this complexity does not mean that the representative acknowledgement of wrongs done by politicians and other community leaders is unimportant. On the contrary, it can have a powerful effect.

Acknowledgment of wrongs done and hurts caused represents a facing of the reality of what a particular group, community or nation has done and an acceptance of responsibility. Acknowledgement of what has happened, a willingness to review the story we tell about ourselves, a sense of regret and a disapproval of past actions by our group or community, open up the possibility of new or better relationships in the present.

For apologies or expressions of sorrow to have power they must be made by leaders who have credibility and a capacity to be considered representative, by the group they are apologising on behalf of, and by the community to whom they are apologising. Apologies

and expressions of sorrow are speech acts and the words chosen are important because apology and expressions of sorrow publicly put on record the fact of violation and accept or fix responsibility.

It is precisely this fixing of responsibility that may cause difficulty. The same piece in the Guardian which reported this Lifeline march went on to say the following.

The British government has never apologised for its key role in the slave trade, something which he described as “squalid”.

But the government’s response is not accidental. John Prescott’s announcement on Thursday that he planned to institute a national slavery day was merely the latest in a number of carefully choreographed gestures to express government remorse without actually using the S-word. The prime minister’s most significant intervention came in November, when he wrote a lengthy statement for the New Nation, a black newspaper, that described the slave trade as “profoundly shameful” and expressed his “deep sorrow”.

The statement was the culmination of a process involving three government departments, advisers and the close personal attention of Mr Blair. He wrote the final version himself, having first compared the words he intended to use with apologies issued by other countries.

Mr Blair’s uncharacteristic reticence was prompted by guidance from his legal advisers that saying sorry could also mean admitting liability to an individual or group claiming compensation.

There were also political considerations, said an adviser. “These things are all about striking the right tone. [The prime minister] had a different decision than that of Ken Livingstone. London is a different constituency. You don’t have to worry so much about the shires.”

Finding the right tone and words for community leaders to speak about the abolition of slavery and our responsibility is actually important. However, becoming fixated about an apology may be to focus on the wrong thing. Even more important is to do something about the complex legacies of the slave trade today and the modern versions of slavery. We cannot change the wrongs of the past but we can act better in the present.

David Stevens