

Thought for the month October 2017

It was one of the foulest smells I'd encountered and so strong I can almost conjure it today, more than seven years later. A combination of a musty dankness with a sharp acrid bitterness like the rotten fruit of something big that was never sweet. I asked the guide what it was. He simply said 'it's because of what happened here'.

His diagnosis of the deathly odour hanging in the dungeons of the slave fort at Elmina in Ghana may have been a prosaic attempt to draw the events of history into the present; but regardless of whether the stench of human waste and sickness overflowing in a dark cavern crammed with bodies could really last 2 centuries is academic. Any one of my other senses confirmed that this place had been the site of depraved human atrocity too deep to describe; and any reading of history confirms that the long-abolished atlantic slave trade left its indelible mark on the way the world has developed since.

Another slave fort, the same weekend. The guide at Cape Coast Castle is clear about his purpose: to inform, not to accuse, instead simply relating what is known about what happened here. Looking smarter than Elmina, with its whitewashed ramparts and pristine halls, its underbelly nonetheless remains dark and close like a shameful secret. My moment of horror here is provided by a small grilled hole in the ceiling of a dingy passage leading to one of the dungeons. In the rooms to the side of this passage, slaves awaiting sale would be crammed together for up to a month, standing or lying in their own waste whilst week after week the traders and owners would look into the grill on their way into the chapel directly above, cautioned by this picture of sin and hell as they prepared to pray.

It's said we can't judge history. Perhaps not – we weren't there after all. But it might be natural to be revolted by images of 'the faithful' going into sing hymns within arms-length of the poor souls on whom they themselves are inflicting diabolical suffering. Unless, regardless of context, we're baffled by how it's even possible for a person with any conscience not to see the wrong in it, we might not begin to look critically at our own times to consider whether there is suffering in which we might inadvertently be complicit.

It may be that inequality is not so extreme in our experience, or perhaps is much more removed than arms-length but it still exists and globally speaking it is still extreme. Does our over-use of fossil fuels worsen this inequality by intensifying climate change? Are our taxes invested via pensions funds in sales of deadly weapons used by repressive regimes against civilians? Are we satisfied that the cheap food we eat and the clothes we buy are not produced by indentured labour or at least in a way which impoverishes the environment and controls the destiny of poor communities elsewhere in the world? Do we know that slavery itself has in fact been abolished – or is it just hidden?

This autumn Airton Friends Meeting are looking at just a small but important part of the inequality in the world. With dramas, readings, talks and crucially a discussion by experts about the reality of contemporary slavery, the events fortnightly from 17th September to 29th October will be revealing, thought-provoking and perhaps even hopeful. After all, the slave trade was abolished, officially speaking, and slaving in the US came to an end some decades later. In an era when 'all lives matter' - black, white, every shade- we can be encouraged by the 'moral arc of the universe' and apply ourselves to the task of bringing it home to justice.