

Matthew 9: 10-13

1 John 3: 18-23

Isaiah 58: 6-11

Sermon by Revd Dr Carrie Pemberton

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I have come to call not the righteous – but sinners

Josephine Butler was born in Northumberland in 1828 the daughter John Grey and Hannah Annett. Grey was a wealthy landowner and the cousin of Earl Grey, the British Prime Minister who led the Whig administration between 1830 and 1834. Her father was a strong advocate of social reform and played a significant role in the campaign for the 1832 Reform Act and the repeal of the Corn Laws. These facts are of interest if you take Richard Dawkins book: *The God Delusion* at all seriously where he argues for the significance of nurture in the development of religious affiliation – a fact that was so eminently taught to the Israelites over 3 millenia ago when in Deuteronomy we read that teach a young person the way in which they should go and it will be their guide throughout their life.

Butler had a reforming spirit nurtured into her – the expansion of the suffrage in 1832 to male householders had been won by her uncle, she herself took up the mantle of the suffrage movement and the inclusion of women within higher education joining Anne Jemimah Clough in her work to gain women acceptance in the university of Cambridge – a piece of campaigning which resulted in the eventual establishment of Newnham College towards the end of the nineteenth century.

However the work for which she is remembered and in whose footsteps a great deal of CHASTE's work follows and develops is her response to the Contagious Diseases Act. In Butlers opinion this Act passed in the early 1860's developed and regulated for the use of the state, its military personnel and the wealthy dilettante, a cohort of women who were defined as common prostitutes and subject to regular and highly intrusive examinations to certify that they were 'clean' and available for prostituted sex for the standing army in the Uk and across the colonies. There is an edited journal of Butlers diaries and writings where she lambasts members of parliaments, special committees, specific members of the house of lords, the judiciary and gatherings of clergy to argue for the removal of what for Butler were heinous and immoral acts. she saw the process of regulation as incarnating a double moral standard, where women were always perceived as the source of pollution, of disease of contagion, and subjected to the correction of the hierarchies of religion, the judiciary or guardians of health, and never the men who purchased.

She argued that a state which regulated and organised a system of control as the Contagious Diseases Act deployed, was responsible for promoting and normalising a whole class of 'common prostitutes' which was to become an acceptable and designated role for certain women with poor education and low access to alternative employment to become embroiled in. Her work as a champion for womens

incorporation into education and the work place – with her fierce advocacy of womens apprenticeship into a whole variety of working environments informed this reaction to a state which was happy to pass a whole range of labour related legislation which drove both women and children out of the work environment but regulated their incorporation into the ranks of those servicing the physical frustration of men who were stationed in the military camps of our cities, and those whose victorian morality cloaked gross immorality in their actions of purchasing women for their sexual satisfaction.

Butler was indignant and worked tirelessly for the repeal of these acts which came about in 1886. However that was not the end of the issues to be faced out. Examination of what was happening in the cities of the Uk Revealed for Butler that children as young as thirteen years of age were being traded and moved into brothels in the great cities of Britain. Butler joined with Florence Booth of the Salvation Army to campaign to raise the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen which occurred with the passing of the Criminal Law ammendment Act in 1885. The research which informed the case of Eliza Armstrong the young 13 year old daughter of a london chimney sweep sold for £5 into a london Brothel, also revealed the activity of sales of young girls from the countryside to those who traded them across Belgium, France and Holland into what became known as the white slave trade. Butler called those who had been animated by the movement for the abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade to pay attention to this contemporary form of enslavement happening within the shores of the UK, only meted out on young women.

Butler died in 1906 – without either state honours or those of the church. Yet all her work, was clearly inspired by an understanding of the gospel of Christ where the practical elements of the gospel – the command of Jesus to let the children come to him, to treat the needy, those in prison, those without clothes as those who had first call on her time. You cannot pick up a letter of Butlers, or a statement to the Houses of Parliament select committees without the message of Christ’s authoritative voice for justice, mercy, generosity, and action commanding attention and response. Butler would leave an audience, or a congregation not in negotiation with her words or views, but under the gaze of Christ, whose image was marred every time a young woman was recruited into enforced sexual labour, every time a woman was interred in prison for a lifestyle which was not her choice.

And now as we remember her death – 100 years on what are our challenges, where does Christ call us to attend. In CHASTE we have met amongst the 80 women with whom we have directly dealt or enabled others to counsel, those as young as 15 when first embroiled in the international market for sex which is the backdrop for trafficking for sexual exploitation. Today we know that at least 4,000 women are held in brothels, massage parlours, secured houses and appartments where they are visited for over 16 half hour appointments a day – 6 days a week. They keep virtually none of the money which the men are charged – that goes to the brothel owners, the pimps, the minders, the small platoon of people involved in the trafficking rings which have sprung up all over the UK, and are in full display in many countries of Europe where trafficked figures escalate to an estimated 200,000 women being traded for sex.

Like Butler, CHASTE has created a series of partnerships to provide safety for those who are survivors of the trafficking brutality, and hope for the future for those who are

being relocated back into their countries of origin – the Roman Catholic religious and the Salvation Army being significant in their contribution in this area particularly in the provision of Safe houses.

Like Butler we undertake active lobbying of parliament to see the appropriate legislation put in place to protect women who have been trafficked and to see the growth of the market of demand – for sexual services reduced. The CHASTE time for arrest campaign has been significant in calling on the government to see the Council of Europe convention on trafficking ratified. This year one hundred and one years after her death I believe Josephine Butler would be delighted to see the new campaign being launched by CHASTE to drop demand – to put an end to the double standard and see clients, pimps and traffickers clearly targetted as the reason why this abuse continues to develop in contemporary society.

CHASTE is only too aware of the links between the brutality and deprivation which is part of the UK on street prostitution world, and that of the migrant enforced labour which is brought across the continents in airplanes, boats, containers and trains, to sate the apparently unsateable 'lusts' of the new male leisure pound in the metrosexual environment of the third millenium. The appalling serial murders in Suffolk of young women in their late teens and early twenties serve to raise the issues of the dangers and the sad dependency which some women are groomed into as they become involved in selling themselves to 'get by' – or serve the drug habit of boyfriend pimp, or pay off their indebtedness to suppliers of drugs. The streets of Ipswich are not so far away from those of Gdansk, Calcutta, Pnom Penh, Lagos, Vilnius, Bucharest or Moscow where many of those who are trafficked into the UK to supply the growing demand for pay as you go sex, and make those who traffic them unbelievably wealthy – a young woman sold originally in Vlora for £300 can earn for their trafficker in Europe over £100,000 a year.

What would Butler have said? What would she have done? It is quite clear to me that she would have been providing shelter, lobbying government to see laws changed, and appealing to pastors and congregations up and down the country to see victims protected, crimes prosecuted and our culture of demand addressed and changed. That is why 20th May 2007 has been announced by CHASTE in conjunction with NCAP and CROP two organisations working specifically with those UK young women caught in prostitution, as NOT for SALE Sunday – in order to graft into the liturgical life cycle of the churches the concerns which Butler held dear. That women are human too, that when a woman or child's life is threatened with physical and sexual abuse, Christ's own body is being abused, that Christ is yet again being brought to crucifixion – except this time the body is a woman's. This is how Butler saw the world of state regulated prostitution in her day, and the white slave trade. What has changed I wonder in the ability of the church to respond to her rallying cry to be the hands, and voice of Christ in protection and protest?

Amen.