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Church's slavery apology 'is not enough'

By Ben Fenton

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Lisa Codrington knew her ancestors were Anglicans like her and that, almost two centuries ago, they were slaves. But she did not realise until recently that they were slaves of the Church of England.

The clue is in her name: Codrington. Slaves of British planters often took the name of their masters and, until 1710, Miss Codrington's forebears lived on the Codrington plantation in Barbados.

After that date, as she discovered for herself a year or two before [the apology in this week's General Synod](#) made it clear to the rest of us, the Codrington lands, and the hundreds of slaves on them, became Church property.

The Codrington slaves, men like Devonshire Codrington, born in 1776 and Lisa's many-times great-grandfather, did not become free until 1834, when the Church, like all slave-owners, was forced to release them.

Anglican culpability in the Caribbean slave trade can be traced back at least to 1710, when the planter Christopher Codrington died, leaving his 800-acre Barbados plantations to the Church's newly-established Society for the Propagation of the Christian Religion in Foreign Parts (SPG).

So Miss Codrington and her family are well-placed to comment on the Church's apology. "It's a good start," said the 28-year-old actress and playwright, who was born in Winnipeg, Canada, of Barbadian parents and now works as an actress in Toronto.

"But is that all? I don't know how I feel about the apology until I hear everything about it. Is it involving reparation? Is it involving further work, further education by the Church?"

Mention of reparation will send shivers down ecclesiastical spines, because many institutions, including the British Government, have worried about apologising for slavery in case they are asked to put their money where their mouths are. "The more they do the better they do," she added.

"Slavery is not something you can say sorry for and then be done with it."

Miss Codrington has been in Barbados for a month, researching a play about pre-emancipation life, with her mother Hughlene.

Mrs Codrington left Barbados for Canada in the 1970s, but her daughter has been back several times, fascinated by how much detail she can find about her slave ancestry.

She feels that the Church of England will have got away lightly if nothing more than words come from its bout of self-flagellation. "People have gotten worse [punishments] for doing less," Miss Codrington said. She started to think about her ancestry when a teacher at her drama school asked her to write a monologue "in an accent" and she chose to do it using her mother's native Bajan dialect.

But she has not leapt straight into a quest to lay the blame for her ancestors' sufferings. "I am at the investigative stage right now," she said. "I am the sort of person who likes to understand why things are the way they are.

"I realised that some of these things, like names and faiths, may not have been necessarily matters of choice. They may have been imposed. For me it's more important to figure out why and try to understand it than to get angry." In north-east London, Miss Codrington's aunt, Ivy Devenish-Scott, 48, an educational consultant, had not heard about the Church's apology until told by The Daily Telegraph.

Although a Pentecostalist rather than an Anglican, she inclines to be forgiving of the Church of England's past sins towards her family. "I know that the Church, unlike the rest of the plantocracy in Barbados, established the first schools for black children there.

"I am not saying that excuses what they did though, and it would be right for them to provide more now for the families of people who suffered. I don't think a lot of people knew what they did then, and would be appalled, but it seems like an appropriate time to apologise"

In Barbados, Woodville Marshall, emeritus professor of history at the University of the West Indies, said the Church's sins over Codrington were those of omission more than commission. "They had professional planters to run the place," he said. "The Church didn't play an active role, because they were more interested in the receipts."

After the plantation was left to the SPG, its slaves were branded on the chest with the word "society", to remind everyone that these were slaves of the Lord. In 1740, 30 years after the Church took over, four out of every 10 slaves bought by the plantation died within three years. "Most people in Barbados are not too troubled by these issues," Prof Marshall said. "It was not so much the SPG that the Church should be apologising for as the activities of the individual parsons who kept plantations and slaves for sheer profit."

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