

**Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906**

**A sermon preached by Emma Hodge on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 at St. Michael & All Angels Church, Sandhurst**

*May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

**“God and one woman makes a majority”<sup>1</sup>**

This is a quote by today’s Heroes of the Faith, a Victorian English Woman called **Josephine Butler**.

Josephine Butler is known as both a founder of Christian Feminism and as the Saint of Prostitutes. However there is so much more to her story than just the headlines.

Josephine was born in Northumberland and was the seventh of nine surviving children. Her parents and one of her sisters, Harriet, were large influences on her life. Her family would be described as upper middle class. Her parents were Anglicans and were instrumental in helping Josephine develop her faith and her moral views.

Her mother taught all her children to read, write, and play music and Josephine became an accomplished pianist. Her father was involved in her education, which included studying from the Old Testament prophets, such as the prophet Amos as we heard earlier, he would especially focus on passages which was about treating the poor fairly. Her father was **actively** involved in campaigning to abolish the slave trade. Unlike several other men of his time, he didn't believe his wife and daughters should be shielded from the horrors of slavery, instead they should know and understand the evil that it was.

At the age of 17, Josephine had what could be described as a conversion experience, which led her to prioritise daily bible study and private prayer; a practice that she kept each day for the rest of her life.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://makingatrack.wordpress.com/2014/03/04/josephine-butler-justice-and-solidarity/>

## Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906

Josephine met and married George Butler, a classics professor at Durham University who later became a priest and he was ordained by the Bishop of Oxford. During their time in Oxford, Josephine found that several of the views and attitudes of the Oxford professors challenging and while at first she kept quiet, she then started to speak up and challenge their male supremacist views of women.

Josephine and George moved to Cheltenham, where they suffered with the death of their daughter following an accident in their home and their faith sustained them during these difficult times, however Josephine couldn't bear to visit a church or grave for several months and she became ill and suffered from depression but as part of her grief she looked for ways to help others in the world.

They then moved to Liverpool where George was a headmaster of Liverpool College, Josephine initially continued to suffer from depression but she started working at a workhouse in the centre of Liverpool.

Workhouses at the time housed a wide variety of people including homeless people, convicts, prostitutes and unmarried mothers.

While several people supported workhouses, often imposing their own views and beliefs, Josephine's actions **were different**; she talked to prostitutes with kindness, with courtesy and she worked to find them homes and this included taking them into her own home where they were treated as **cherished guests**. In Josephine and George, they saw something of the **Love of God**, something that they may not have known about or seen in action before. At this time, prostitution was illegal in Britain,

Josephine, with the help of friends and merchants, worked to establish a "*House of Rest*" where those who were not dying, were able to regain part of what they had lost – their health and dignity – they were able to do this by undertaking small jobs such as envelope making, sewing, laundering and these jobs were paid, so the women did not have to turn to prostitution to make a living.

Even with all this work. Josephine had a growing conviction that she was being called to do more than just act with compassion and care for others. Josephine started to work on the defence of women's rights. This was not easy and she

## Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906

faced with opposition from people who felt that women should focus on home and husband, which as Josephine pointed out, doesn't help the single women, including widows, in society.

Josephine started by writing and campaigning for better education for women. Josephine had been blessed by receiving the same education as her brothers and she wanted the same for other women. Josephine also campaigned for fairer wages for women's work, there was (and in some ways still is) a feeling that women should be paid less for the same work as men. An issue that is still ongoing today, with some employers, for example Bracknell Forest Council, paying their women 23p less for every one pound they pay men<sup>2</sup> while the National Church Institutions of the Church of England<sup>3</sup> are even worse paying women 29p less for every pound<sup>4</sup>.

Josephine became a prolific public speaker and she encouraged women to develop their focus from the domestic duties to areas which had previously been considered male territory such as maths, history, literature. As a result, public libraries had to change what they stocked.

Josephine published several articles and led several petitions to universities to admit women, and her petitions included signatures of other notable women of the age such as Florence Nightingale, Mrs Gladstone and Mrs Tennyson.

This meant that Josephine had to travel around the UK and this affected her health she suffered from headaches and tiredness, however she found that **spending an hour with God** would refresh her more than sleep.

Josephine was forced to change her focus from women's equality in education and employment to campaigning to repeal a law which had been passed and violated prostitutes civil rights, the Contagious Disease Act, and several friends and doctors urged her to act, however this was not an easy campaign and she didn't take it on straight away, wanting to reflect on it with her husband George. They eventually agreed to act and to campaign for its repeal.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/Employer/CXZUMrc2/2019> Accessed 13 Feb 2021

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/national-church-institutions> Accessed 13 Feb 2021

<sup>4</sup> <https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/Employer/CXZUMrc2/2019> Accessed 13 Feb 2021

## Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906

Josephine didn't focus on the medical and moral aspects of the campaign for the repeal, instead she focussed on the constitutional violation of personal liberty and quoted from a document signed in 1215, the Magna Carta, any other criminal has (and had) the opportunity to remain silent, however prostitutes were forced to sign various forms, not after conviction but only after suspicion of prostitution. Josephine argued that the legislation encouraged the belief that prostitutes were worthless and this was "*blasphemy against human nature and against God*"<sup>5</sup>. The campaigning that Josephine and her fellow supporters carried out was not always welcomed, and when a manifesto was published in a national newspaper, it was written by women defending women's rights, and this shook society, and even the house of commons, but there was a cost, Josephine was attacked on several occasions. The process to repeal the law was a long one and suffered many delays, but Josephine continued to study **and to pray throughout this time**.

Josephine travelled to Europe, supposedly to rest and she discovered, something that still, happens today, the trafficking and grooming of young women for sex. Something that was known as the white slave trade. Josephine returned to the UK and fought to change the age of consent from 12 to the current age of 16.

George was made a canon at Winchester cathedral and they moved into a home in the cathedral close, and Josephine founded a new "*House of Rest*" nearby, but due to George's declining health, she found she had to spend more time supporting him in his ministry. George died in 1890 when the Josephine was 62, and this marked a challenging time in Josephine's life, she spent the next few years living with her sister and then each of her three sons; her own health was also starting to decline, however she carried on her **life of prayer** and **campaigning by letter writing** in her final years and she died peacefully in Northumberland, having thanked her nurse and said her final prayer in December 1906.

What can we learn from Josephine Butler's life?

There are four main points

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<sup>5</sup> The rise of the caring power; Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands by Annemieke van Drenth and Francesca de Haan; Amsterdam University Press, Page 103

## Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906

**Firstly**, Josephine spent time each day in prayer and bible study? Many of us do this anyway, but if not, why don't you try it? You don't have to follow any particular order of service in reading plan, just spend time listening to what God is saying, telling God what is on your heart and opening your bible and see what God is saying. If you want something more formal, then there are suggestions on our website or from any good Christian bookshop (when they are allowed to open again).

**Secondly**, Josephine, found that spending an hour with God was refreshing? In Matthew's gospel, Jesus encourages us to spend time with him, especially when the pressures mount. Jesus said

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.<sup>6</sup>”

Everyone is really busy and pressure on our lives is great, but what would happen if you make time away from all the work, chores, and distractions in our life and just focus on God, spending time with Him in His presence, our church is open during the week for people to do just that. What will change about a situation you are experiencing, will you find yourself re-energised or perhaps you will see a situation from a different perspective?

**Thirdly**, Equality was central to Josephine's life, As Galatians 3:28 puts it

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>7</sup>”

over a hundred years have passed since Josephine's death and yet our people are not treated as equals; Women, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic groups, and the LGBT+ community are just three groups which are paid less than others, suffer discrimination and abuse, and **do not have the same opportunities, rights and respect as others** in society, and often the Church of England.

Josephine didn't try and force her views and beliefs onto others, she talked, and listened to them, and in doing so, she showed God's love to them. By listening and understanding Josephine was able to see areas, such as education and fairer wages, which could, eventually, be changed.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:28, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:28 NRSV

## **Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906**

Our society is unequal, are we happy with that? Or should we be involved in campaigning to change things? Josephine did not keep silent on views, she challenged them, often coming up with a different perspective to solve an ongoing issue.

**Lastly**, Josephine showed the love of God in her actions, she referenced<sup>8</sup> the parable of the sheep and the goats<sup>9</sup> pointing out that Jesus had instructed to care for those in need in our society and that our motives for our actions need to be ensuring that we are like those who care for the least in society, no matter the reason. Josephine campaigned for the end of what is now known as Child Sexual Exploitation, how children are groomed for work in the sex trade has changed, but it is still going on. One of our charities, the Children's Society<sup>10</sup> is involved with stopping this work both by working with young people who are at risk of exploitation and also raising awareness of this type of abuse. Are we aware of the signs of Child Sexual Exploitation and how young people can easily be groomed into this life?

In closing let us remember the words of the first letter of John chapter 3 which sums up Josephine's life

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us<sup>11</sup>

If you want to know more about Josephine Butler then there are references in my sermon which will be on the website later, including articles written by Josephine

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<sup>8</sup> <https://attackingthedevil.co.uk/related/morality.php>

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/preventing-child-sexual-exploitation>

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:23 NRSV

**Josephine Butler; 13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906**

**Articles written by Josephine Butler**

<https://attackingthediabol.co.uk/related/thoughts.php>

<https://attackingthediabol.co.uk/related/morality.php>

<https://attackingthediabol.co.uk/related/lovers.php>

**More information:**

Josephine Butler, A guide to her life, faith and social action by Rod Garner, published by Dalton, Longman and Todd, 2009

<https://canonjohn.com/2020/07/25/heroes-of-the-faith-josephine-butler/>

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/18-december/books-arts/book-reviews/josephine-butler-a-very-brief-history-by-jane-robinson>

<https://josephinebutlerpage.com/about/>