

Dear Friends,

'Changing the World'

One hundred years ago, on 6th February 1918, Parliament passed the *Representation of the People Act* giving British women (or at least some of them) the right to vote. The campaign which culminated in this momentous political development was driven forward by two main groups, the suffragists and the suffragettes.

A number of suffragist groups began to emerge in the mid 19th century, and in 1897 they all came together to form the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* led by Millicent Fawcett. They believed in using peaceful tactics – non-violent demonstrations, petitions and political lobbying – arguing that, if they could press their case in an intelligent, polite and law-abiding manner, they would prove to the sceptics that women could behave responsibly and be trusted to participate in the political life of the nation. By the early 1900's, it was clear that this strategy was bearing fruit. Several Bills in favour of women's suffrage won support from MPs, and although it was not enough for them to be passed, many were convinced that it was only a matter of time before change was achieved.

The suffragettes differed from the suffragists in that they disliked this polite, softly-softly approach and were frustrated by the set-backs in Parliament. They favoured direct action, and in 1903 they formed *the Women's Social and Political Union* with Emmeline Pankhurst as their leader. The controversial activities in which they sometimes engaged included the planting of bombs, the smashing of shop windows and acts of arson, so not surprisingly they attracted considerable media attention. Hundreds of them were arrested during the course of their campaigning. Some who were imprisoned were force fed in a most unpleasant way when they went on hunger strike; and one called Emily Davison was famously killed at Epsom racecourse when she threw herself in front of the king's horse.

The exploits of suffragettes were headlines news. But which of the two groups, the suffragists or the suffragettes, did most to bring about change? Historians are still debating that question. And from a practical point of view, we Christians may well wonder which of them would most readily have won the support of Jesus. He also wanted to bring about change, but he shunned violence. He resisted the pressure to join the revolutionary Zealots; he told listeners to love their enemies and turn the other cheek; during his temptations in the wilderness he rejected the idea of using military force to achieve his ends, and on the first Palm Sunday he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of peace, rather than on a war horse.

He did on occasions resort to direct action, such as when he drove the tradesmen and money changers out of the Temple, and he did incur the wrath of the authorities by breaking the Law of Moses (touching a leper for example in order to heal him). But whilst he would have applauded the suffragettes' courage and commitment, his basic approach was more akin to the softly-softly tactics of the suffragists, and this has important implications. I, for example, am involved with a society (ASWA) which believes in campaigning on animal welfare issues peacefully and lawfully, and we find it incredibly frustrating when calm, well presented arguments against animal cruelty are drowned out by dangerous, violent and irresponsible behaviour of people engaged in 'direct action'. However strongly we may feel about an issue, we must avoid 'becoming a dragon to slay a dragon'. As St Paul once wrote:

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

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