

Slavery Today

Isaiah 61:1-4; Galatians 3:23-29

Most people in the United Kingdom assume slavery was abolished in 1833, but today's evidence is to the contrary in nearly every part of the world, including our own country. It is estimated that there are around 12,000 people in the UK living as slaves. Government agencies, the Police and charities are overwhelmed by the rise in human trafficking and modern day slavery. The number of trafficking referrals to Police Scotland has steadily increased in recent years, with 2017 seeing a rise of 38%. The UK and Scottish Governments are currently reviewing existing legislation to tackle human trafficking and modern day slavery.

Those who have been trafficked and enslaved are robbed of their humanity and are violated spiritually, physically and emotionally. Human trafficking is a type of slavery that transports or trades people for the purpose of exploitation. According to the United Nations, around 2.5 million people around the world are caught up in the web of human trafficking at any given time. Human trafficking has an impact on people from many different backgrounds and people are trafficked for a variety of purposes. Men are often trafficked into hard labour jobs in agriculture or building sites, and can sometimes be deployed to pop-up car washes. Children are trafficked into the textile industry, agriculture and fishing industries. Nail bars and cleaning companies will often use women who have been trafficked. Women and girls are typically trafficked into the commercial sex industry, and sometimes boys and men are too. The Police estimate that there are around three or four hundred 'brothels' in Edinburgh, with the number rising to one thousand during the Festival. Flats and Airbnb accommodation will often be used as temporary brothels for a short period before moving on.

Trafficked people are moved to where the demand is, and global trafficking patterns tend to flow from the east to the west, with many of the poorest and most unstable countries showing the highest incidence of trafficking. Extreme poverty in those countries is a common factor amongst

trafficked victims. Where economic alternatives do not exist, vulnerable men, women and children are at greatest risk.

According to United Nations' figures, the most frequent 'sending countries' are Thailand, China, Nigeria, Albania, Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. In the UK, apart from Nigeria, most trafficked victims come from Eastern European countries. It is estimated that every year the human trafficking industry generates around £26 billion.

In Scotland campaigners claim that human trafficking is the second most profitable illegal activity after the drug trade. In the C19th a slave cost the equivalent of around £20K today, yet it is estimated that a modern day slave costs around £10. Organisations and charities working in countering human trafficking and modern day slavery suggest that the economic challenges to industry are considerable and it is reckoned that 77% of the economic supply chain has an element of 'slavery' in it. There is a significant challenge to food and clothing suppliers as elements of modern day slavery are found at source. Serious questions are being asked about how much of the UK economy has a dependency on human trafficking and modern day slavery. Many will not want to hear the answer.

Isaiah's great text, often associated with Advent, centres around the idea of salvation. God's Servant, a powerful figure in the writings of Isaiah, is someone who desires to be used by the Lord as an instrument of reconciliation and healing. God's Servant is the one who is called to pass this calling on to the rest of the community of faith. It is no surprise that Jesus appropriates this text at the launching of His teaching ministry, recorded in Luke's Gospel, where it is often described as the 'Nazareth Manifesto.'

These words speak of promise and reassurance with themes of justice, hope, anticipation and freedom. Whoever hears them hears God speaking directly into every situation of oppression and despair. Affliction, broken-heartedness, captivity and imprisonment come in many forms in our world today. The words certainly apply to those ensnared in human trafficking and modern day slavery. But they also apply to all of God's hurting children caught in addictions, dysfunctional relationships, dead-end jobs, unemployment and loneliness. God seeks to bring

transformation into people's lives. This passage begs questions of its readers as much as it does of those to whom we apply its meaning. How are we being called to play our part in God's plan for the world? What transformation needs to take place in me?

Individuals, situated within communities, organisations and countries are called to be part of God's transformation in politics, economics and social systems. What would this entail in relation to how we tackle the sins of human trafficking and modern day slavery? Isaiah calls us not simply to address future aspirations in the transformation of society to meet God's Kingdom standards; Isaiah calls us to address current and pressing needs, so that we, as far as we are able, not only show solidarity with the 'oppressed', 'broken-hearted', 'captive' and 'imprisoned', but do something to challenge and encourage politicians, local authorities, emergency organisations, charities, churches and businesses to address human trafficking and modern day slavery today.

In his Letter to the Galatians Paul shouts the good news of faith as he sees it. When Christ calls the entire world to faith, all means all. While we see divisions and distinctions and things that mark us off from each other, Christ sees only sisters and brothers. Are we willing to stake our faith and our church membership on the manifesto Paul offers us in these verses from Galatians?

It is difficult for us to grapple with the truth that the gospel does not begin with us; it begins with Christ and His all-embracing welcome. There may be things that separate us on the surface, even beneath the surface, but it is as nothing to the power of Christ to reconcile all things and all people. Christ makes us one body; Christ weaves us together into one tapestry of believers; Christ shapes and selects us to make one glorious stained glass window of human faith, turning brokenness into wholeness.

As we look at the world, scarred in many ways, and with the particular scars of human trafficking and modern day slavery in mind, where is the Church, and where is the community, that lives out loud the vision Paul writes in his letter? We look for the reassurance of similarity, whereas Christ looks for the evidence of the Spirit's all-pervasive presence.

In his book, *What's Wrong with the World*, G K Chesterton wrote, 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.' All are children of God by trust, and by faith.

In Christ a new people is formed. Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but rather, one new people. None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen. None so enslaved that they cannot be set free.

Christians are called to work under Christ for a world that brings that freedom and that human dignity to all God's children.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen