

Advent 4

Today's theme is the end times and human trafficking. End times as I've said before is basically the theme of Advent – the looking forward to the coming of Jesus at his first coming at Christmas 2000 years ago and using this as a preparation for his coming in glory at the end of the age.

But what has this to do with human trafficking? And besides which, what is "human trafficking" anyway?

I found a website call "stophumantrafficking" and it had a recent news items which included one dated 9th December 2009. It said:

So it's Christmas shopping season and the high streets and city centres are full of bustling crowds, frustrated shoppers, and people splurging out on big presents for each other during this festive time! So what could you buy for £3,000? A flash new Rolex? A HD LCD TV? Some jewellery for your loved one? An exotic holiday?

How about a young Lithuanian woman in her 20s?

Shocking – yes, but this is what occurred on London's busiest shopping high street – Oxford Street –last week. Pimps, and their bodyguards, were caught on police surveillance outside Selfridges department store last week selling a young girl to a brothel owner for £3,000 in cash. The pimp was Albanian, and part of a gang that controls nine brothels in London. The young girl he was selling would be expected to earn her new owner up to £100,000 a year by having sex with multiple clients on a daily basis.

Luckily, this woman was one of twenty-one women rescued by the police, and she has been returned back home to her family. The gang, consisting of men in their twenties and early thirties, were arrested on charges of trafficking, controlling prostitution and running a brothel – and face trial with a prison sentence of up to a total of sixty three years.

So is human trafficking only about sex and prostitution?

Certainly not!

Masud was 12. His parents were persuaded, tricked, to let him be taken from his home in Bangladesh to a new life in England. He was sold - 'Trafficked'.

He left his family home with an unknown man who travelled with him to London then onto the South West of England where he was abandoned in an Indian restaurant. To survive he worked in the restaurant living in small store rooms, sleeping next to jars of chutney and bags of onions. Sometimes when there was no work he was forced to sleep on the streets. He was not able to go to school and his life was controlled by the restaurant owners.

When he was 28, with the help of STOP THE TRAFFIK he contacted the local police and immigration team who helped him to obtain a passport and identity documents, resulting in him being able to return to Bangladesh to obtain a UK visa and to be reunited with his family.

Masud is now living legally in the UK. He is married and is building a new life away from the restaurants.

Stories like Masud's are happening all the time, making human trafficking the world's fastest growing illegal trade. It could be **called**... No, it **is** the 21st Century form of slavery.

But what has all this got to do with Jesus and Advent and Christmas? The Bible is full of stories of human trafficking and slavery. The Hebrews held as slaves in Egypt, Ruth and Boaz, the Ethiopian eunuch and even Mary and Joseph forced to travel to

Bethlehem to be counted in the census and then being forced to flee Herod's wrath into Egypt.

How do we define a slave or slavery?

A slave is a person who is the property of another human being; whose will is completely subject to their owner's authority, and whose labour is obtained by coercion.

But surely slavery ended with William Wilberforce in the 19th Century. It doesn't still happen does it?

Unfortunately it still does. Women sex slaves in the hundreds of thousands are forced to work in brothels in South East Asia and in their thousands in most Western countries.

Bonded labourers numbering an estimated 15 million occur in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Child soldiers are forced to take up arms in the many thousands, in Africa, South America or SE Asia. I wonder if any of our congregation have had experience of these child-soldiers or perhaps have escaped from being a child soldier themselves?

There are forced laborers in factories - especially in the apparel industry but also in homes as domestic servants, on the land and in restaurants and hotels. Such slave workers are common in trading centers such as Singapore and Hong Kong, in the oil rich Arab states and to a lesser number in the affluent West, including South Africa where parents are tricked into selling their children to come and work in the cities as domestic workers.

Our OT reading has the prophet Micah predicting that little Bethlehem will be the place where the Messiah will be born. The Messiah will enable the rest of his kin and the people of Israel to return home and live in security and at peace.

Home, security and peace; this must be the deepest desire for all of us. Certainly it is the deepest desire of those living like slaves having been human traffic around the world.

This is what the Messiah promises when he comes. Home where there is peace and security. Yet at his first coming, his own parents were forced out of their homes in order to travel to the census, then forced to flee into exile. But, praise the Lord, they could return and settle in Nazareth where Jesus could grow up in wisdom and in favour with God, in home with security and peace.

Now I'm sure none of you are going to go out and splurge £3 000 on a 20 year old woman from Lithuanian. We might be all sinners but that is going a bit too far! So what can we do to prevent human trafficking? Firstly, we should be very proud that the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongo Ndugane has in his retirement taken charge of an NGO aimed at stopping human trafficking. We need to support him and his NGO's efforts. How?

1. Get informed. Look up 'forced labour', 'child labour', 'slavery today', 'child soldiers' or 'trafficking women' on Google.
2. Pray for enslaved people more frequently in our Parish intercessions. The plight of women, children and families who have been affected by slavery should be matters for prayer in church.
3. Find simple, everyday ways to act. Use your power to help the powerless. We have financial power. Our action at the cash register can make a difference back through the supply chain to where slave labour is used. We can change our buying behaviour - buy fair trade tea and coffee and chocolate or other certified products or 'green' 'conflict-free' diamonds certified under the Kimberly process as a way of assuring justice back through the supply chain.
4. Find and patronise sources of goods made by women who have been re-skilled after being trafficked into the sex industry.
5. Support our local church-based mission and care organizations as they address the question of slavery.

Yes, I know it is easier said than done and that we hardly see any fair trade goods in South Africa and if we did they would be more expensive and so our excuses pile up. But if we simply say, "It's not me and it doesn't affect me" then nothing will change and we will await the coming of Jesus just as unprepared as we were at his first coming 2000 years ago.