

Study Day on Modern Slavery

Truro Methodist Church, 11th April, 2015

The day opened with “And can it be” and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Dr. Russell Blacker welcomed us and introduced the day: churches should be active in relieving slaves, as in William Wilberforce’s day, because the current estimate is 35.8 million people now entrapped in modern slavery. Human trafficking has grown even in the UK and our demand for cheap goods makes it worse elsewhere. Wilberforce showed what can be achieved by a few, and even if all we can do is pray that has a big impact.

The first speaker was **Baroness Caroline Cox**, who showed the revised edition of her book *This immoral trade: slavery in the 21st Century*, which looks at contemporary slavery in all its forms, demonstrating that William Wilberforce’s mission has not yet been accomplished. She outlined the four main areas of modern slavery: chattel slavery, child soldiers, sexual slavery and human trafficking and used case studies to illustrate these and demonstrate that for labour and sex trafficking Britain is both a destination and a source for victims of the illegal traffickers. Hence the significance of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which aims to break the bonds of ignorance, silence, interests, ideology, complacency and complicity. This is an escalating evil in our world today, but individual freedom is every person’s right. William Wilberforce asked, “Will we fulfil our responsibility?” “I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing”.

This led to the next speaker, James Ewins, a barrister and former Director of the International Justice Mission (IJM), Bangalore. IJM <https://ijm.org/> rescues and rehabilitates slaves and aims to change the balance of power and make public justice systems, such as India’s Bonded Labour Act 1976, work. He is also a Fellow of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) in the UK, and was involved in the development and passage of the Modern Slavery Act. Referring to Micah 6: 8 and Matthew 23:23, he said that justice is at the heart of our God, which is why we, as God’s creatures, have a sense of justice in our hearts. On his return to the UK in 2010 he was shocked to discover, through the CSJ, the extent of slavery here: the CSJ’s report went straight to the Home Secretary and resulted in the draft Bill for Modern Slavery, which received remarkable cross-party support, going through 263 amendments before being passed this year. It is the first such Act on the statute books, drawing together criminal provisions against trafficking from hidden sub-sections of other acts and raising the maximum punishment from five years to life, taking trafficking up on a par with murder. There are new orders for the police and compensation for victims, plus restorative justice provisions and cross border agreements. There is now an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland, whose role as the “voice of the voiceless” is to stand up for victims regardless of the government currently in power. Child trafficking is a particular care and every public body has a mandatory duty and can be called to account, but there are still contentious issues and James appealed for our prayers. Transparency in supply chains is also needed: we are all complicit by the choices we make as consumers and should hold companies to account who do not publicise their suppliers’ details. This world leading piece of legislation should serve as an example to other countries and foreign aid could be attached to the improvement of local justice systems.

After *Amazing Grace* Dr. David Hampshire looked at Slavery in the Bible, examining slavery in the ancient world, the Old Testament, the New Testament and among the church fathers in the 2nd – 5th centuries. He concluded by referring to Leviticus' order to look after strangers: the way we treat migrant workers just because they are strangers is anti-biblical, anti-Jewish and anti-Christian and says something about our society.

Next Dr. Muhammad Al-Husseini spoke about slavery in Islam: some Muslims have interpreted their texts to provide a theological mandate to return to slavery as part of Jihad. He said that our government goes along with this when it supports Saudi-Arabia, not standing by Sweden's condemnation of Saudi abuse of human rights. He compared interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qu'ran in their references to slavery in pre-Islamic Arabia and looked at slavery in Islamic history.

The final part of the day was given over to local speakers and NGOs. First Paul Elliott from Crimestoppers, an independent UK registered charity, affirmed that human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. He said that it is not only foreigners who exploit or are exploited, but that British people are sold into slavery by British gangs, even in Cornwall, where nowhere is more than 13 miles from a slave and only two thirds of migrant workers are registered.

Next the Devon and Cornwall Police Migrant Worker Team (2 officers), funded from the permit to work scheme and operating in Cornwall since January 2010, outlined the situation here. They told us how to recognize the signs of someone being held in subservience, which we should not ignore, but contact the Police, Crimestoppers, or Council Officers if we are suspicious. They mentioned that victims often turn to churches when they don't know where to go, so we should be ready to help them. Michelle Davies, from Safer Cornwall, a multi-agency partnership making the Modern Slavery Act work locally, and the Modern Slavery Commissioner for Cornwall, reiterated that churches are often seen as places of sanctuary, so we should prepare our response.

The final speakers came from A21 <http://www.a21.org/>, Love 146 <https://love146.org/> and Stop the Traffik <http://www.stophetraffik.org/>, with moving stories of human trafficking and charitable projects to help combat it and support the victims. One of them mentioned that Falmouth Harbour is a major port for buying and selling slaves. We were again urged not to ignore anything suspicious, but to pass on the information.

The afternoon closed with prayers and a final hymn – *Thine be the glory*.