

Homily on human trafficking and the gospel of the Good Samaritan

In the first reading from Deuteronomy, the people are told by Moses to obey God, “keeping those commandments and laws of his that are written in the Book of this Law.” If they do this, Moses tells them, “You shall return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.” In the Gospel reading, it is in fact a lawyer who wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must love God but also says to him, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.”

The man answers, “And who is my neighbour?” What a question! Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were seen as hated foreigners and enemies to the Jews. Samaritans had, for example, sacrilegiously ruined Jewish Passover celebrations a few years before. The lawyer has to admit that it is the Samaritan who proved himself a neighbour and we get the sense that he still cannot speak the name of the enemy but simply call him, “the one who showed pity.”

In our deanery, it was decided that a focus for the year would be the terrible modern problem of trafficking. When we ask the question, “Who is my neighbour?” we have to face the fact that we often do not know who those who live closely around us actually are. Bishop John Arnold has recently stated that he fears that there are probably trafficked people in every parish in the diocese.

Just to be clear: trafficking is modern day slavery. It is the taking and buying and selling of people often involving their imprisonment and transfer from one place or country to another. Trafficked people are exploited, abused, subjected to violence, made to commit crimes or else forced into work or sexual slavery. It is “man’s inhumanity to man.”

Sadly, in the run-up to the recent referendum on whether to stay in or leave the European Union, there have been many voices raised in hostility to migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers. Many people have shamelessly expressed fear and rejection of foreigners. In the Old Testament, the people were constantly told to show pity to the widow, the orphan and the stranger. It was seen to be a matter of justice. Catholic Moral Theology teaches us that justice is “giving the other person what is due to them.”

Pope Francis is trying to re-establish a “Church of the poor” and to encourage the faithful to become missionary disciples. As we seek to evangelize the world and carry the Gospel to others, what does that mean in practice? Jesus certainly preached to people and taught them, but he also took practical action as well: he healed people, fed them, set them free, befriended them and showed pity to them. He didn’t just talk.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols recently addressed a Special Conference held at the United Nations on 7th April this year. Here is part of what he said:

“More personally I stand before you because of three key moments in my life.

The first was four years ago when I listened, for the first time, to the witness of a young woman who had been betrayed into the slavery of enforced prostitution. Her story was heart-wrenching. But what added a particular depth to my shock was the fact that she was a young English woman, trafficked from England into slavery in Italy.

The second moment was occurring about the same time. I began to witness a remarkable partnership being built in London between religious women and London police force, Scotland Yard. This partnership transformed the effectiveness of operations to rescue victims, care for them and pursue to prosecution the perpetrators of this horrendous crime...it was essential that the police gave to the Sisters the assurance that the victims of trafficking would not be prosecuted, but rather they would be helped.

The third moment came two years ago when, at the end of our first Santa Marta Conference in Rome, Pope Francis turned to me and asked me to keep this work going. That is an order that cannot be refused!" (The full text can be found on the St Michael's and St John's parish website.)

So, Bishop John Arnold, Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Pope Francis have all stated how essential it is to do all we can to combat this modern evil that is probably happening in the Ribble Valley, in the terraced streets of our urban locations and in sleepy picturesque villages.

So, when we ask the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?", we might also ask, "And what can I do for my neighbour?", I suggest three things: firstly, after mass there are prayer cards available at the back of church or else that will be handed to you. Begin by praying about the issue and asking God what he is inviting you to do; secondly, get behind your parish representative who is supporting the Medaille Trust in its anti-trafficking work, or you might like to volunteer to be the representative; thirdly, you can help to raise awareness of the issue and take a leaflet which gives you more details about trafficking and how it can be detected and reported. We might be the only eyes and voices that some imprisoned people have.

Some might object that this is a political issue – which of course it is, in part – and that we should leave it to politicians to sort out. I always remember the words of the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu who once said: "When people say that the Bible and politics don't mix, I ask them which Bible they are reading."

Jesus has made it abundantly clear through the story of the Good Samaritan, that we are to go beyond a simple keeping of the law in order to try and keep ourselves on the straight and narrow and sort out our own salvation. We are called to love neighbours as ourselves. In this Year of Mercy, that means recognising that we are all neighbours in the global village. It means responding to the fact that some of our neighbours, down our street and across our

land, have been trafficked. The Samaritan showed pity. Jesus said, "Go and do the same yourself."

Summary of points

1. The Gospel reading asks us to go beyond just seeking our own salvation and a mere adherence to the law.
2. The Gospel reading asks the very relevant question: "Who is my neighbour?"
3. The Gospel points out that those thought to be foreigners or enemies are in fact our neighbours.
4. In modern society, we often don't know who are neighbours are.
5. A simple explanation of "trafficking" is given.
6. Comment on the recent Referendum and how it elicited fears about and hostility to foreigners.
7. A reminder of Pope Francis's "Church of the Poor" and his exhortation for us to be "missionary disciples" is made.
8. Our evangelisation is in part service and action and not just words.
9. Some very stirring words from Cardinal Vincent Nichols are quoted.
10. Three practical things that all can do to support are suggested.
11. A defence is made of this being the remit of politicians.
12. The conclusion is that Jesus commanded us to show pity and "go and do likewise."