

Talk at St James the Less

In March 2016 three men were sentenced for trafficking at Preston Crown Court. Two Romanian women believed they were starting a new life in the UK, but were instead forced into degrading and disreputable work. They were rescued because a man was concerned about the girl he had paid to meet. He 'phoned the Police. Two of the men were jailed for 20 years and one for 13 years.

I am Anthony Brown, a volunteer representative for Caritas Anti-Trafficking in the Diocese of Salford, working mainly with Lancashire Constabulary to raise awareness on the issue of human trafficking.

I am not here today to appeal for money. I don't want money. I want YOU to help the church and the Police in fighting human trafficking.

Some of what I am going to say may shock you, but we cannot ignore what is going on now in our neighbourhoods. With Jesus as our guide, it is our Christian duty to stand up for those who are being exploited; to ignore the problem is to be complicit.

At the latest estimate there are 40 million slaves in the world. That is more than at any time in history. Thousands of these are trafficked to the UK each year.

In December 2014, Francis gathered with religious leaders from faiths around the world to commit to eradicating "modern slavery across the world ..."

Launched by Pope Francis, and headed by Cardinal Vincent Nichols, this led to the Westminster based Santa Marta Group which is an alliance of international police chiefs and bishops from thirty countries around the world.

Caritas Anti-Trafficking works in the spirit of the Santa Marta Group in encouraging people, and Catholics in particular, to be aware that human trafficking exists in our communities.

Let's join Pope Francis in pledging to play our part in ending human trafficking in the Diocese of Salford. There are over 40,000 of us and if we keep our eyes open we can do it.

East Lancashire Police which covers Rossendale set up a special unit of seven full time officers to fight trafficking in 2015. Last year their work led to 14 men and one woman being convicted of human trafficking offences.

I went to one of the premises in Preston with the Police after the occupants of the house had been removed and I sensed the same emotional reaction in the eyes of the police as I experienced myself. It was a scene that would rend the heart of anyone – all manner of tools of the trade, wipes and thrush pills on a table, and a teddy bear on the floor next to an unmade bed.

In that house the Police found a diary. Let me read an extract: *can't take it anymore. I want this hell called life to end. I don't have the courage to say anything! I must lock the pain and misery in my soul and forget about them!*

I don't have any specific knowledge of trafficking in Rawtenstall but it is highly probably that girls were trafficked here in 2017, to men using an outreach service they would have no idea was being run by an organised crime group based in Blackburn.

It's highly probably that enforced labour exists in your midst. If any of you work in the NHS you should be particularly alert. One in 8 people in the NHS think they have seen a victim of human trafficking, and one in 5 victims report having come into contact with healthcare services during the time they were trafficked.

Not far away in Burnley there have been two notable instances of women and trafficking. In 2016 a Romanian man was jailed for running brothels in Blackburn and Burnley. Also in 2016 a woman ran from house, where she was being held, to a policeman in the street. He rescued her from her traffickers

People are trafficked from all over the world but particularly Eastern Europe, Nigeria and Vietnam. Many are not illegal immigrants but tricked into coming here legitimately. A significant portion are UK citizens.

In the north of England it's not just the women I've been talking about. It's also enforced labour and other things. Some of these people are on view in car washes and nail bars, working on people's drives, or in factories where they are shipped in vans to an employer using an employment agency.

What can you do about this? Well firstly let me tell you what people DIDN'T do.

Slaves rescued from a traveller site in Lincolnshire in 2017 had been working on people's drives for many years without anybody reporting anything. A man was seen in a cellar in Blackburn by a member of the public two years before he was rescued. A man who listened to one of my talks became suspicious about a car wash near to where he lived, but before he reported it a raid rescued 8 Romanian nationals.

On June 17 you should have received one of these cards. On the front are the general signs of human trafficking –enough to tell you that when something doesn't look right it probably isn't.

If you didn't take a card on June 17 or if you have lost it please take another today as you leave church.

Please keep the card to remind you to be on the look-out, and to know what to do if you see something.

I want to draw your attention to anti-trafficking roadshows across Lancashire. A highly significant and successful part of these roadshows is the Freedom Bus – it's the same bus that the Diocese used as the Mercy Bus in 2016 but with new signs promoting anti-trafficking. The bus was in Blackburn last weekend and will be in Preston in the next couple of months. I expect it will visit Rawtenstall at some stage.

Finally I mentioned a pledge earlier on that we join Pope Francis in playing our part in Salford Diocese. When you leave church today please think about signing that pledge which only asks you to pray, and to play your part in being aware, and acting if you see something.

Thank you for listening, and thank you Fr Tony for allowing me to speak on this very sensitive, but very serious topic. Please come and see me after Mass if you would like to sign our pledge, invite me to speak at other groups, or learn more.

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