**Hidden in Plain Sight**

There are many myths about modern day slavery: One is that it does not exist; slavery was abolished by Act of Parliament in 1833. Yes, it was, but there are more slaves in the world now than there were then and, in 2019, there were at least 136,000 in the United Kingdom. That number is the equivalent of the population of a town the size of Ipswich or Blackpool.

A second myth is that they are all from Eastern Europe or the Far East; nationally, the highest number come from Romania, with Vietnam second, but in Leicestershire, British come at the top of the list. And the third myth which I am going to address is that they are women in the sex industry; in fact, there are victims of slavery all around us. We probably meet with or speak to a victim several times a week without realising it. They may serve us in a café, do our nails, wash our car, answer our telephone in a call centre or cold call us. There could be victims of slavery working at the building site up the road, caring for an elderly relative in their care home – or their own home. Chillingly, they can be children trying to sell drugs to your children or grandchildren. During lock-down it has been reported that children as young as five have been carrying drugs for adults. They may not be slaves now, but they are at risk. Recently, the spotlight has fallen on the garment industry in the small factories and workshops in Leicester, but well-known companies, which may be international can be employing victims too. There could be one working beside you.

People like this are legally employed, they are permitted to work here, they may of course, be British. They are doing the same work as their colleagues, but their wages are being paid into bank accounts to which they have no access. They are living, in squalor in a caravan or house of multiple occupancy where they are in physical danger and are denied basic human rights. If they qualify for benefits, these will be diverted too. A growing trend is for people to be sent out to shop- lift or commit other petty crimes. Some care for cannabis farms and children are used as drug-carriers – the County Lines.

Modern slaves are vulnerable people who have been targeted and exploited by criminal gangs. Many have been approached, possibly at a hostel, outside a job-centre, in a pub or on the street. A report in 2019 mentioned that 7% were recruited in places od worship. Some are men and women, who falling on hard times, trusted a so-called friend. Addicts are always vulnerable and easily controlled because they need their drugs or alcohol. 47% answered a job advertisement.

What is being done about this: In Leicestershire and Rutland, in response to the concerns of the Police, a partnership was set up in 2018 – the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Modern Day Slavery Action Group. I represent the Diocese of Leicester on the group. Other groups represented include local authorities, trade unions, local and government authorities such as HMRC, Border Force, Fire Service, Health and Safety, NHS. Also, the Red Cross, Barnados, Roman Catholic diocese of Nottingham, Hope for Justice, Crime Stoppers, Soroptomists, retailers and manufacturers. That list does not include everyone. The group is convened by De Montfort University and chaired by a member of the Police Force. Until the Covid 19 crisis, it met monthly at DMU, now it meets bi-monthly, online.

The Church of England has appointed the Clewer Initiative to work specifically with modern day slavery and I attend their meetings too which are held a Lambeth Palace. They run training courses and produce some very good publications, tool-kits for different sectors of society and materials for use in schools. It is well worth looking at their web-site.

In this diocese, I learned about modern-day slavery several years ago, while I was MU Diocesan President and brought this concern to the Social Responsibility Panel. When my term of office ended, I was asked to stay on the Panel to concentrate on slavery, and this I have done since the beginning of last year. I have given quite a lot of talks and have run an Awareness day as well as passing on what I have learned to the panel. Most of this has now been posted on the SRP web-site. I have been very keen to establish a team of people who could share the work and the ideas, and this has now happened. Seven of us joined on-line and agreed to form a group dedicated to fighting modern day slavery on behalf of the diocese. Their first initiative was to get us onto Face Book. The group will meet bi-monthly. We all have different stories and different areas of expertise, but I believe that we will complement each other. Early this year I prepared information files for each deanery. Thanks to Covid, these did not go out, but, instead, we shall be sending information and a poster to every parish after this meeting.

Whenever I speak to a group I am always very honest about my Christian faith and the fact that this work comes from my love of God and my commitment to do whatever I can to carry out His work in the World and to show His love. It is interesting to note how often slavery is mentioned in the Bible, of course, life was different then and it was an accepted part of life. But slaves are never described as of no importance. From the instructions in Leviticus that Hebrew slaves should be offered their freedom after seven years to Paul’s letter to Philemon about the runaway Onesimus, we can see that God loves slaves, as He loves us all. The tragedy today is that the criminal gangs regard their victims as expendable. I wish that they could all know that they are not expendable to God.

What can you do? Please pray, not just for the victims but for all who are trying to help. There is one practical need in this area – the Police hoped to buy a house which they could use as a ‘safe house’ for anyone rescued from slavery. Their application for a grant has been declined, and at present, they use hotels, which are not really secure. Be aware of the problem. A Clewer video asks if we are blindfolded to it. I think blinkered is nearer to the mark but there are still many people who do not believe that slavery still occurs.

If you see something which concerns you, there are telephone numbers which you can ring:

* Modern slavery Help-line – 0800 121 700
* Police 101, or if the matter is urgent 999
* Crime Stoppers are hoping to set up a line shortly.

To quote a Detective Inspector who campaigned to get the partnership established ‘If you see something which feels ‘wrong’ it probably is’.