

7th Sunday of Easter
Acts 16:16-34
John 17:20 to end

Theme: Modern slavery.

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen, please sit down

A couple of weeks ago I spent the weekend in Weymouth and was privileged to see the tallship Tenacious up close in Weymouth harbour. Some of you may recall I have a passion for all things nautical and several years ago now was lucky enough to take part in the Cutty Sark tallships race on the other Jubilee Sailing trust ship the Lord Nelson. The Jubilee Sailing Trust allow disabled and able bodied crew to challenge themselves on a real tallship, it's amazing experience and seems to change everyone who takes part. Seeing Tenacious at sail in Dorset, the land of smugglers and pirates reminded me of Paul's missionary journeys, snippets of which we will hear about over the next few months. If you can't wait, I highly recommend reading the book of Acts, it's a jolly good read with shipwrecks, snakes and storms included.

Today we have heard about Paul and his friend Silas who seem to be having a very bad day. We read how they were hounded by a slave girl who won't leave them alone, at first this was probably seem as a good thing... Free advertising for Christianity, but then, as the days went on it must have got a little repetitive, like a stuck record playing the same phase over and over again, until Paul looses his rag and commands the spirit within her to come out. Suddenly she is quiet and thoughtful and I bet Paul and his friends and followers thought thank goodness, but then her "bosses" found she could no longer sell her visions for money, their income stream had dried up and they were not happy bunnies and demanded that those Jews were flogged and thrown into jail.

Who was this girl who had pestered them? We read she was slave girl. 2000 years ago slavery was rife, 200 years ago Britain led the way in the slave trade, tallships from the Caribbean and Africa brought slaves into the docks in Bristol. Thanks to the tireless work by William Wilberforce and other concerned Christians of his time, the Abolition of Slave Trade Act was passed. So it is almost beyond belief that in 21st century, millions of human beings across the world are still pressed into the horrors of slavery. Yes, slavery is still present.

Unbelievably, this scourge of society is present in the streets and houses of our towns and cities. Coronation Street is covering a Modern Slavery story at the moment.

Modern slavery remains a crime hidden in plain sight. The belief holds strong that it can't happen where we live and that it doesn't affect those around us. Yet, according to the Global Slavery Index, there are 136,000 men, women and children in the UK alone, trapped in modern slavery today.

The headline of the Royston Crow in September last year stated: Police are supporting eight people they believe could have been held as slaves after discovering them at a business premises in Kneesworth today.

The Comet reported in September 2017 : Police have made a series of arrests related to suspected slavery and trafficking after a number of dawn raids today - including two in Baldock.

Programmes like Coronation Street offer a real opportunity to shine a light on what is happening before our eyes. They enable us to create a discussion not only around what modern slavery is, but also the support available and the skills to identify signs that it's happening to someone in our community.

Modern slavery is happening in nail bars, as Coronation Street will depict, but the plight isn't confined to one service or industry. Forced labour can take place on farms, in car washes or in local shops. Domestic servitude could be happening behind a door in your street, whilst sexual and criminal exploitation is happening in our towns and communities as we speak.

What can we as Christians do?

To eradicate this brutal and unforgiving crime, everyone must acknowledge their role in stamping out slavery.

The fight against modern slavery also requires that each and every one of us is vigilant in actively noticing and reporting unusual circumstances. Does the person you're concerned about look malnourished or dishevelled? Do they seem anxious, not talking or seemingly unable to maintain eye contact? Do their living or working conditions seem to be dirty or insufficient, without appropriate clothes or equipment to do their job? Do they seem restricted in their movement, who they talk to or the possessions and documentation they own?

All of these factors could be a sign that someone is being exploited against their will. In recognising these signs, we can take steps in ensuring victims of modern slavery can access the professional support they need to recover and begin to rebuild their lives. In the first instance the local police should be notified using the non emergency number.

Or even perhaps, are you in a position where you feel trapped, unable to escape. There is another way, speak to someone.

But it is not all doom and gloom. There is good news, for everyone. In our Gospel reading today Jesus prays for himself and for his disciples. He says "Father, the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus wanted the disciples to have faith, to remain true to the Father, to believe that they are loved through the promises and teaching he had given them.

There is something we can learn from this text. Jesus also prays for us to remain in the faith as we face trials in our lives.

There are many times when you and I are not quite sure of our faith, not quite sure what is going to happen next, not quite sure what the future is going to hold for us, not sure if we are loved. At these times, it is a comfort to recall these words of Jesus.

It is good for us to know that even when we hear about things, like slavery that seem alien to us or even when it seems evil is close by, we can still have a relationship with Jesus, we can still have faith, we are loved, always. We can still cling to his promises, we can still rely on his presence in our lives. Jesus is always there for us.

We can be assured that Jesus is praying for us to remain in faith, and remain in the truth of God's word. To have strength to stand up for what is right.

We thank him for those prayers and we pray that he will give us the power to be faithful to him and to his words, today, tomorrow, next week and always.

Amen

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