

Modern Slavery

Tomorrow is kept worldwide as the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. The date, 2nd of December, marks the date of the adoption, by the General Assembly, of the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others of the 2nd of December 1949.

According to the United Nations the focus of this day is on eradicating contemporary forms of slavery, such as trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, the worst forms of child labour, forced marriage, and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict. Essentially it refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.

We may have thought that slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century. And we have people like William Wilberforce to thank for their great perseverance that led to the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.

Yet the figures produced by the International Labour Organization show how much this is still a problem in our world today. The statistics are both staggering and extremely salutary:

- An estimated 40.3 million people are in modern slavery, including 24.9 million in forced labour and 15.4 million in forced marriage.
- There are 5.4 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people in the world. 1 in 4 victims of modern slavery are children.
- Out of the 24.9 million people trapped in forced labour, 16 million people are exploited in the private sector such as domestic work, construction or agriculture; 4.8 million people in forced sexual exploitation, and 4 million people in forced labour imposed by state authorities.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by forced labour, accounting for 99% of victims in the commercial sex industry, and 58% in other sectors.
- In addition, more than 150 million children are subject to child labour, accounting for almost one in ten children around the world.

It is of course the poor and the powerless who are most vulnerable to exploitation. And that is a great indictment on society as a whole.

There are many texts in the Bible that proclaim the duty to protect and improve the lot of the poor. The passage we heard just now from the Gospel according to Luke (Luke 4.16-21) is surely one of the key texts, though. Jesus quotes Isaiah's calling to bring good news to the poor and to let the oppressed go free. Jesus then proclaims that that calling has been fulfilled in himself. The good news is one of freedom and liberation. That is the good news to which those who seek to follow Jesus are to work for in our world today. We pray that with God's help that work may succeed.