

Reflection on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Chapter 2 of Fratelli Tutti, for Welcome the Stranger Event, 8th February 2021

I want to echo our thanks to those who helped to bring us together for this event – Stephen Hicks of *Caritas Clifton* and Deborah Fisher and Canon John Deeny of *Caritas Plymouth*. It is good, too, to be with my brother bishop, +Declan and with the people of Clifton Diocese. You will know one of the phrases that Pope Francis uses in *Fratelli Tutti, Brothers and sisters all* is, “we are all in the same boat”.

I am sure we all feel that at this time. Having heard from Caroline Virgo, of the *Clewer Initiative*, that there could be as many as 10,000 people in modern slavery in our region, it can feel a little overwhelming. That is why it was good to hear the testimony of Hana’s story. As Pope Francis reminds us, we do not look at those in need as ‘a crowd’ or ‘a group’ but we seek to meet the person in front of us, to look them in the face, and respond to them. We thank Nick Hanrahan, too, from the *Jesuit Refugee Service*, for reminding us of those adjectives *Welcome, Integrate, Protect, Promote*. I found the practical advice for parishes particularly helpful as a path for addressing how we might get involved.

We gather on this day dedicated to St Josephine Bakhita and having just heard that parable of the Good Samaritan we know that she made that journey from being cast aside on the side of the road, to becoming a Good Samaritan herself. She spent her last years in reaching out to those who needed God, she sought to serve in practical and simple ways, as a Christian and Religious Sister.

This is the journey we hope for all those who are caught up as victims of the terrible evil of modern slavery. We want to help each one on the journey from being cast aside on the side of the road to being Good Samaritans themselves.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Chapter 2 is, in many ways, the centre piece of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti – Brothers and sisters all*. The Pope recalls the many exhortations to fraternity and charity in the Old

and New Testaments, so that “we can better understand the significance of the parable of the Good Samaritan: love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another.”

Pope Francis puts us in touch with the interior struggle that each of us experiences as we encounter those who suffer. I always find it personally challenging. As the Pope writes, “Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. And if we extend our gaze to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, all of us are, or have been, like each of the characters in the parable. All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan.” He asks: “Which of these characters do you resemble? We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak. Let us admit that...we have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly.”

There is no doubt about where the Holy Father’s heart lies. He does not speculate too much on the circumstances that have brought the situation about, though there is much food for thought on economic realities and social integration. Pope Francis’ interest is to encounter the reality of the person who is in front of us. Perhaps his most attractive pastoral quality is his palpable concern for the poor and the afflicted. His frustration is evident when he perceives that too many cannot be bothered – and the poor, sick, vulnerable, those in modern slavery are simply left on the side of the road.

“What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us,” he writes. “It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people’s problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering” (65).

We know this is not a new teaching of our faith. St John Chrysostom summarizes it in this way: ‘Not to share our wealth with the poor is to

rob them and take away their livelihood. The riches we possess are not our own, but theirs as well.' In the words of St Gregory the Great, who sent the Missionary St Augustine to bring the faith to England, 'When we provide the needy with their basic needs, we are giving them what belongs to them, not to us.'"

As we reflect on the parable this evening, let us allow it to challenge each of us to make a decision about how we include or exclude those who are being trafficked, or trapped in modern slavery.....those lying in the ditch along the roadside. The starting point for us individually and as a human community is to cultivate "a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives."

The invitation of the Holy Father in his reflection on this parable is quite simple and straightforward. "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all....

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth

Blessing Prayer for victims of Modern Slavery and for all working against it.

Merciful God bless all the men, women and children who have died after leaving their homelands in search of a better life. Though many of their graves bear no name, to you each one is known, loved and cherished.

May we never forget them but honour their sacrifice with deeds more than words. Bless all those who have made this journey, enduring fear, uncertainty and humiliation, in order to reach a place of safety and hope.

Just as you never abandoned your Son as he was brought to a safe place by Mary and Joseph, so now be close to these, your sons and daughters, through our tenderness and protection.

In caring for them may we seek a world where none are forced to leave their home and where all can live in freedom, dignity and peace.

Merciful God and Father of all, bless us and wake us from the slumber of indifference, open our eyes to their suffering, and free us from the insensitivity born of worldly comfort and self-centredness.

Inspire us, as nations, communities and individuals, to see that those who come to our shores are our brothers and sisters.

May we share with them the blessings we have received from your hand, and recognize that together, as one human family, we are all migrants, journeying in hope to you, our true home, where every tear will be wiped away, where we will be at peace and safe in your embrace.

And I bless you all, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen