

The word made flesh and dwelt amongst us full of grace and truth

Flesh is a complex term for us to begin to understand and deal with. Each one of us is enfleshed – we have no consciousness outside being people who are embodied. And yet this word flesh also has other meanings apart from representing people in their bodily state. Flesh is also a term which conjures up the vulnerability of women – firm flesh, nubile flesh, warm flesh, naked flesh, succulent flesh are all ways of talking about or thinking about people which places them in a sexual perspective. The difficulty with this is that just as we frequently forget we have bodies when we are thinking or indeed praying or reflecting on God, so we can forget that the images of women and men displaying their bodies have behind them people with real lives, needs, vulnerabilities, and God given entitlement for respect and love.

Flesh in the world of sex trafficking discourse, conjures up a world where women and young children's bodies can be sold, felt, beaten, raped, and transported regardless of the wishes of the person to whom this 'flesh' belongs. To speak and think in categories of flesh is somehow depersonalised, removing the processes surrounding the 'flesh' from any sphere of relational responsibilities, or what we have classically spoken of as ethics.

And this is what the creative word from whom all created life, the universe, humanity and ecology is derived, took on. The word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. And that flesh was full of grace and truth.

What an incredible difference from what we see taking place in the flesh-markets of the sex industry today. This '*industry*' now revenues more across the world than that of global military expenditure – a staggering estimated \$7000 - \$9000 billion on leisure sex. Within this category come erotic bars, sex aids, on line porn, brothels, massage parlours and on-street prostitution, lap dancing clubs and new telecommunication innovations with chat lines and messaging services providing an ever increasing range of spending your sex leisure pound.

And what of grace and truth in this environment? Grace and truth in sexual relationships surely has to be related to truth telling and love. Grace refers to the generous self-giving love of God, and all our relationships, which include those sexually realised, need to have that element of self-giving love as part of their expression. The difficulty with all forms of prostitution and trafficked sexual exploitation in particular, is that love, mutuality, consent, choice and freedom is simply not in the frame of reference. The only ones with any freedom and choice in this scenario are those who purchase the time and access to someone else's body, not those who are prostituted.

And God we read in the account of St John became a vulnerable baby, taking flesh and living amongst us. This engagement by God into the ordinariness and brokenness of our world, includes the world of trafficking for sexual exploitation. This world in which it is estimated 500,000 women are involved globally, and a minimum of 4,000 women in the United Kingdom. Mary's delivery of Jesus in an outhouse in the southern city of Bethlehem must have been hugely distressing and confusing for her.

However she was at least with her husband and was on the receipt of a substantial quantity of divine reassurance, if somewhat disconcerting visitors.

For a trafficked woman who is becoming enslaved in sexual exploitation, the world starts to take on a particularly malicious, dangerous and terrifying complexion. She believes somebody's promise of a better life, of opportunity, of taking a risk and leaving her relatives and support structure and travelling abroad. In return she is deceived, brutalised, raped and isolated.

And the word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. What would it mean for this market in flesh to receive the word, to receive truth-telling, grace and mercy? For a start it would obviously mean complete liberation for all those currently caught in enforced trafficked prostitution – over half a million women, and countless hundreds of thousands of children, both boys and girls across the world. Secondly it would mean that we took very seriously the drivers which lie behind the extraordinary expansion of the sex industry and in particular the market for commercially available sex. Women's bodies stacked high for half hour pay-as-you go slots.

We need as churches and Christians to take this interface between the divine face of love and the travesty of love making which is part and parcel of trafficking for sexual exploitation and enforced prostitution extremely seriously. It will mean that we shall start to make some changes locally as well as nationally to the availability and acceptability of paid sex on demand. The exploitation, brutalisation and blasphemy which this form of male leisure activity represents, needs to be unveiled. In the light of interventions by activated and informed citizens and voters, change will undoubtedly start to occur.

As the last verse in our reflection states- in Christ was life and that life was the light of men; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it. We are living in a time where there is distinct darkness in many arenas of the sex leisure industry.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation has been steadily expanding across the world in order to fulfil the explosion in demand for pay and go sex. This Christmas is a time for the light to be lit in our churches and neighbourhoods to interrupt the onslaught of this darkness, and to bring the liberation of the full humanity and life which relational, consensual, enriching, and humanity-affirming love embodied in the word made flesh represents.

Below are some actions for your church, cell group or yourself personally to consider alongside your prayers and giving:

CHASTE can provide churches with the following

- speakers who will help you understand the complex processes and realities of sex trafficking, how this is impacting the UK, latest developments in your area and what you can do to help
- lead a training event or workshop for a group of churches in your area to help you develop the pastoral capability to respond within your community
- help you put on a special event at your church to raise interest and mobilise support within your congregation
- provide you with resources you need to lobby government on important legislation required for victim care and support and/or help you voice your concerns to your local council and/or parliamentary representative
- provide content for articles in your church publications in order to raise awareness in your congregation and wider networks

- provide you with latest developments to inform your prayers

CHASTE is also inviting churches to participate in

- the JustShare May Day event May 2007, a joint initiative by JustShare, CHASTE, Christian Aid, Stop the Traffik, Set All Free to be held at the Royal Exchange in the City of London on 3 May 2007 to raise awareness of contemporary forms of modern slavery and the role of financial institutions
- the nationwide 'Not For Sale' worship day being launched by CHASTE, the National Christian Alliance on Prostitution, and the Coalition for the Removal of Pimps on 20th May 2007 to remember the victims of sex trafficking and stand in solidarity with them
- the CHASTE *Demand* roundtable which is working to generate innovative action in the UK to challenge the demand for commercial sex in our society