

## **ANGLICAN CONSULTATION ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

HONG KONG, NOVEMBER 2 – 6, 2009  
OPENING THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION  
by The Rev. Dr. Maylin Biggadike

### **AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?**

The Lord said to Cain, “where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen4: 9)

What if God asks you, “where are the 1.2 million children who were trafficked last year within their own countries as well as across borders?” What is your answer? Do you know where they are? Are you, your sister’s keeper ... your brother’s keeper?

Two and a half million people throughout the world are at any given time recruited, entrapped, transported and exploited, i.e. they are victims of human trafficking. Every year some eight hundred thousand women and children are trafficked across national borders and this does not even include the millions trafficked within their own countries. Eighty per cent of transnational victims are women and girls and up to fifty per cent are minors. These are staggering statistics.

Yes, trafficking is a grave violation of human rights. For people of faith, however, there is an added dimension. When moral theology asks what is the ultimate good for humankind, we are directed to the heart of this question found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptural command to love God above all and to love our neighbor as our self. The young girl sold into the sex trade is my neighbor, is my sister. The young boy sold into the sex trade is my neighbor, is my brother. The countless numbers of migrant workers and domestic helpers who are trafficked are our brothers and sisters. When we ask what it means to love a trafficked child, we are really asking: what is our responsibility towards her and what is the appropriate attitude and action that I am to assume on her behalf?

Horrifying as the statistics are, human trafficking is not only about numbers. Every trafficked person, every face, has a story. What do we see when we look into the face of an exploited child? Do we see Christ looking back at us? How have our lives been interrupted by their plight? Are we able to reach out and say “here I am”.

As I share with you this story about a mother and her daughter, I would like you to imagine what it might be like for you to be in their situation. This is the story of a young girl called Ira who is forced by circumstances to give up what is most precious to any young girl’s developing sense of self and hope for a brighter future. In the face of abject poverty, Ira secretly offers her body for money in order to save the life of her little brother dying of hunger. Motivated by a deep sense of responsibility and the knowledge that she alone holds the hope to her little brother’s survival, Ira makes a sacrifice that will mark her own life forever. These are the words of her mother, Ruku, who helplessly and silently watches:

“I saw her go out in the dusk, sari tightly wrapped about her. Saw her walk to the town, along the narrow lane, which ran past the tannery, following it to where it broadened with beedi shops along one side and tawdry stalls on the other, where men with bold eyes lounged smoking or drinking from frothing toddy pots” (*Nectar in a Sieve*).

We can only imagine what must be going through Ruku’s mind – at once admiring of her daughter’s devotion to her little brother and at once feeling her daughter’s horror and shame, like a dagger in her own heart. What are a mother’s longings for a daughter? We can almost hear Ruku saying: not much, perhaps enough food to eat, some honest work, marriage to someone who returns her love; and, if I could dream a little, just maybe a bit of schooling – is that too much to ask for?

Across a continent, in Brazil, young girls also find themselves in similar predicaments, girls who feel there is no other option but to engage in the ‘selling of their bodies’ in order to survive.

Particularly poignant is an account from a male journalist reporting on the traffic of young girls sold into prostitution in Brazil and men's sentiments when it is announced that new girls are coming to a town.

When a sealed girl -- the expression used for a virgin -- arrives, the town gets advance word. Who will give the best price for the right of being first? Men get together in the room. Dalva, the madam, brings the girl in, looking good, made up, wearing a new dress, making overtures. Bids begin to pour in up to the highest rate, generally offered by the sons of wealthy landowners. The next day this is the topic of conversation among rich young men. Deflowering a girl is a sign of social status (*Meninas da noite*).

One might rightly ask what situation could possibly bring young girls to accept this kind of life. We can only surmise that each of them has a terrifying story, not unlike that of Ira's, to share with us. But the most gripping story here is one of exploitation. It uncovers a brutal system where the powerful seek to gain even higher social status by exploiting the vulnerable, the poor and young 'sealed' girls. It uncovers a society that celebrates the commodification of young girls' bodies and a culture where a young girl's value lies in how well she satisfies men.

I hope that in the course of this consultation, we might each hold before us the face of someone who is a victim of human trafficking. I hope we can remember that love is not a mushy feeling, that love is about responsibility and action. I hope we can say to the face before us -- "Here I Am". I hope we can answer God -- "Yes, I Am My Sister's Keeper"; "Yes, I Am My Brother's Keeper".