

Sunday 28 January 2007: Homelessness Sunday

Homelessness

Readings: 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 2. 22-40

Thanks to Liz and the team for the invitation to speak here at St Martin in the Fields today.

What a wonderful church - named for St Martin who shared his cloak with a poor man, and later revealed himself in a dream to be Christ. This is a church known for a commitment to serving the needy and vulnerable, particularly through the work of the staff and volunteers of the Connection at St Martins.

I am with Housing Justice - the national Christian voice on housing and homelessness - and today I would like to share with you some of my perspectives on homelessness, and explore some of these in the light of the gospel.

This gospel of Jesus Christ – the bible readings we have heard this morning – it challenges us to see things in new ways, to be ready to have our perspective changed.

God often calls us to himself and his purposes when we least expect it, like Christ revealing himself to St Martin in the dream.

I've been in this field of work for most of the last 15 years, working in day centres like the Passage and church drop-ins and night shelters. I started with UNLEASH in May 2003, supporting the network of London churches involved in action on homelessness, and UNLEASH joined Housing Justice in 2006. Amongst other things, Housing Justice is the organiser of Homelessness Sunday each year.

So what is homelessness? What is going on when someone becomes homeless?

I think it is both a *symptom* of problems that people face and also a *test* of our society - how we are at looking after each other.

It's a symptom of problems - the stresses and strains on people and communities today. Put most simply people become homeless when they are displaced from their family, when their relationships and support networks break down. They have become alienated from themselves and others for any of a number of reasons.

Sometimes it is mental ill health, sometimes a dependency on drugs or alcohol. For some the root problem is a disability for which they have never received the right diagnosis, help or treatment, perhaps a learning difficulty. For others it is a sign of their difficulty in finding their place in the world.

Some people start life with the most profound disadvantage – the lack of a stable and loving home, or caring relationships. Many overcome these disadvantages but many struggle to do so throughout their lives.

And let's not forget those who are displaced from other parts of the world, whether as refugees from war or persecution, or having been forced to leave their homes because they cannot find the means to feed themselves. This latter category are considered less worthy of our help, although if someone is desperate enough to travel thousands of miles in a container or a little boat across the ocean in hope of a better life I'm not sure how to separate the "refugee" from the "economic migrant", and whether such distinctions are valid or mean very much?

The other root cause of homelessness – in many ways the background against which these individual stories and difficulties must be worked out – is the enormous shortage of housing. In particular - affordable rented housing.

- The Right To Buy policy was introduced in the 1980's –selling off council housing, and not replacing it –at a time when demand for affordable accommodation was increasing;
- Also the spiralling growth of house prices and the fact that land and housing is allowed or even required to play a significant role as an investment, as a motor of wealth creation, which is actually incompatible with its primary role of providing shelter, a basic human need.
- Finally the fact that many established communities - in cities, towns and villages – strongly resist any expansion in house-building.

All these factors are contributing to a large and growing disparity between the demand for and the supply of housing.

So even assuming that someone who becomes homeless finds a hostel place and the right support fairly rapidly – which is by no means assured – they may well have to wait 2 or 3 years before they have a chance of moving into their own accommodation. Families - in theory at least - should have a shorter wait before they find their way to suitable new homes, but this is by no means always a smooth process either.

So now lets look at this other side of homelessness, the indication it gives of how well we as a society look after each other. This is also where the gospel calls us to make a response, as God has the clearest priority for the poor and the marginalised – those whom the world despises.

Important services like the Connection nowadays receive much of their funding from Government, and do vital work helping people find their way back in from homelessness. The Department for Communities and Local Government is currently funding a £200 million programme of hostel improvements.

Some would argue that these services are sufficient, and that today there is little role for churches to play in the professional care of people with sometimes multiple and complex needs. They may be right, and I would always advocate working together with other agencies – whether statutory and voluntary – to achieve the greatest impact.

But I would also like to say that if we – churches and Christians – if we see a need that we *can* do something about then we *should*. I don't think that it is healthy to hand over all of our engagement, our responsibility or our compassion to be exercised on our behalf by others.

Christians and churches that roll up their sleeves and embark on some kind of practical action, like befriending or supporting people, perhaps running a regular drop-in session or joining others to open winter shelter - I believe they contribute something that is different and complementary to what is offered by hostels and larger agencies - their responses are less institutional, and people who rely on such services recognise the difference.

Let me quickly say this is not an attack or a criticism of the staff or volunteers of hostels or the larger organisations. We must recognise and acknowledge the strengths of there being a diversity of agencies in the safety net supporting homeless and marginal people in our city – I believe also that there is a place for soup runs which is not a view shared by most local authorities in London.

But one critical role of churches together with an independent voluntary sector is in part to keep saying: Look there are still people becoming homeless – Government policy is not answering all the needs we see every day – why are new Europeans ending up sleeping on our streets for want of a bit of help and advice when they arrive at Victoria Station? Etc, etc. To keep asking the awkward questions that we come up against as soon as we begin to get alongside people who are homeless, and begin to connect with the injustice and get angry about the waste.

Engagement like this also challenges us as Christians to open up our own lives. Our own preconceptions and prejudices don't last long once we start to get to know people and their stories.

I would like to finish by expressing the joy that I have found in working alongside people on the margins. I'm sure anyone who has ever volunteered will know what I'm talking about when I say how I have been blessed, and had more glimpses into God's grace and purposes than probably anywhere else in my life.

Some people, no matter what life has thrown at them have the most incredible life-affirming resilience. A joyful refusal to let circumstances get them down.

Don't misunderstand me - I'm not romanticising, or glossing over the reality that sometimes homeless people can be awkward and challenging individuals. Some are damaged and difficult people to work with.

No - the point I want to make here is that many who use our day centres, hostels and shelters live life on their own terms. They have made choices, often consciously rejecting the prevailing values of the society we live in. They have observed the materialistic treadmill and voted with their feet.

Many are truly and prophetically counter-cultural, the unreasonable individuals that our world so desperately needs. George Bernard Shaw said: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

Yes - We do have reason to be thankful for our outsiders and non-conformists - our difficult, awkward and unreasonable friends on the margins – and to try to offer the friendship and practical support they might need, however challenging these encounters might be.

When we can stand together in community with our homeless friends God's love and blessings do flow, drawing us out from our own limiting perspectives, and bringing healing to our lives, our church and our world.