

Sunday 31 January: Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Homelessness Sunday

Readings: 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 2.22-40

There is a huge poster as you go down into the Charing Cross Underground which has been there for some time. It always stops me in my tracks. It shows a young disabled person looking straight out from the poster but where his face should be there is just a hole so you look through his face and out the other side. Underneath the picture are the words: "I am disabled, not someone to look straight through. See me as John. I like playing chess, going to the pub, I have a degree." It is a powerful statement I think of how many people feel: as if they are looked through, or past. This is not just true of disabled people; I think it is true of many people. How many of us feel we have never really been listened to, never really been seen for what we are, never belonged?

Last week I met in the church a man from Iran. He was in a bad state. He had just received a letter from the Home Office to say that his asylum application had been turned down and he was now truly homeless and stateless. The letter said that he had three days to appeal this decision. The letter reached him four days late. He said to me, head in his hands: "I don't understand. How they can say this to me? How can they say they do not believe me? How can they say my brother is not my brother? How can they question my faith? How can they say my story is not true? They have never met me, never talked to me, they have never looked at my face. I am not regarded as a person."

To 'be regarded' means to be seen, to be acknowledged, to be held in someone's sight. Regardez! See me! When I was twenty-five years old, I worked as a teacher, training government-sponsored graduates in Jakarta, one of the most overcrowded cities in the world. I found the homelessness there overwhelming. There were huge skyscrapers and new shopping malls springing up everywhere, but on the other side of the perimeter walls, hundreds of people living on the streets under plastic and cardboard, small kids sleeping on the pavement weaving their way through the exhaust fumes to try and sell nick-nacks and snacks in the smog of the massive traffic jams. I felt sickened by the inequalities. But the strangest thing of all was that the government students I taught didn't seem to see it like I did. They were good people, but when I asked them about the homeless people all around us, it seemed as if I was asking them about something foreign or completely outside their knowledge or regard – seen, but unseen.

We think London is completely different, or is it? Before Christmas I went out early in the morning with one of the outreach teams from The Connection at St. Martin's, who go out many times each week. I was amazed; I had seen, but not seen. There were more than forty people sleeping outside on the pavement or under shop fronts within a half-mile radius of this church. Each day more than two hundred people use the Connection at St. Martin's. Over this winter period there are more – at night packed with more than eighty people trying to find a space to sleep.

Each morning when we open up this church there are homeless people waiting to come into the warm. "You're late! The woman priest always opens up earlier than you," they laugh and chide me. Five minutes does make a difference when it's so icy outside and you are waiting for the radiator.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear the story of Simeon, the faithful servant of God, who has been promised by the Holy Spirit that he will not see death until he has seen the Lord's Messiah. He must have seen hundreds of people going in and out of the Temple, but when the Christ is presented to him he sees the light and the love of God, in this bundle of living flesh placed in his hands – vulnerable, needy, and yet the mystery and the miracle of a God revealed in our humanity. He doesn't just look; he sees with the eyes of his heart and he is filled by the light of what he sees. He sees the truth of the human revealing what is most divine. He sees salvation. And that revelation comes when he is perhaps least expecting it. For this Messiah has none of the signs of a king – simply a very human life placed in his hands, filling him with the mystery and the miracle and the wonder of God here among us.

At the Connection I meet with a group each week providing a space for spiritual support for some of those who are homeless. It is a space open to all faiths and none. The first week I suppose I was a bit defensive; they asked me questions and I remember doing too much talking as though my faith was on trial, as if God was out up there somewhere and needed justifying and explaining. How could I defend a God of love among people who had been through such struggles? But God is not explained; God is revealed. I soon changed, was changed. I learnt to listen and to see. 'Homeless' is not a type of person or character of course, it is many different people of all different ages, cultures, nationalities, ways of seeing and walks of life: people, real people, saints and sinners, and most of course, a mixture of both.

Last week I asked members of this group how I could describe homelessness and this is what they told me to say:

They said no one can really understand what it is like until you yourself are homeless. It is so easy to become homeless. It can happen to anybody. It's a thin wall which divides us. Everybody has got their own reasons which have led them here.

When you're on the street you have to plan ways to survive. In your head is the memory of your past, many memories, painful memories. You need help. But you are ashamed of needing help. If you are homeless it means you are *homeless* – it doesn't mean you are nothing. It's worse when you are cold and wet and people are just rushing past all with a place to go. Worst of all is trying to sleep in wet clothes or when your bedding is wet. You feel as if others think of you like rubbish in the doorway. Some stare at you, some look at you with fear. Most turn away and don't look at you at all. They don't want to know hopelessness.

At night you get woken up by the police; you long to find a place where you can rest but always this fear that you may be woken up or attacked while you are lying down. Lying down, you feel so unprotected – tossing and turning all night, trying to get warm, waking up and just walking. There is no place where you can say 'This is mine'.

The Connection at St. Martin's is different. It is a place where you can be given respect. When people start to talk to you it makes you feel more worthy. You get a shower, you can get your clothes washed, get something to eat, you can start sorting things out and get help addressing some of the difficulties you're in. You can start to look at things more positively and find strength inside yourself again. You can start doing stuff again like painting and singing or joining groups so your story is not just inside you. You start to feel human again.

There is a disarming openness among this group of people. It is strange that you find a humanity that sometimes we, who hide behind positions and jobs and possessions and cyber

communication, have lost. Kaz, the Deputy Day Centre Manager, said to me that she has realised the usual question we ask people when we meet them in this country is ‘what do you do?’ and ‘where do you live?’ A person who is homeless cannot hide behind those answers. Kaz said for her it is a privilege to work with people who have to be honest about themselves. You get to know the full person, the real person, and the circumstances of their lives which have led them there. She said “I feel very fortunate to have met the people I have met. I have learnt through them to look at my own values and the way we judge others.”

I know what she means: stripped of defences and securities we discover the values we really believe. My Iranian friend told me that when he feels abandoned and dispossessed he looks up at the sky. The sky and its light, he says, belongs to everyone. God’s light does belong to everyone and it is often on the edges of our society that the true Church begins. For, faced with darkness, the light often seems to burn brightest. I return to my office humbled, touched, humanised by their lives and struggles, by the stories I have heard. At the very place of abandonment, there I feel God revealed most powerfully in real lives. What an incredible privilege to share in that process of seeing and hearing people discovering meaning, confidence, dignity and truth. And it is not just me who feels that I want to respond with goodness to this encounter. You know what? Since the St. Martin-in-the Fields Radio 4 Christmas Appeal more than £800,000 has been given by people throughout this country towards the work of the Connection and to help ordinary people in times of vulnerability and crisis through small grants – to help after they have heard about just some of those stories on the radio.

On Wednesday the Connection was rocking. I was invited to an evening’s entertainment led by members of Streetwise Opera and homeless people who had been learning to find a voice and to sing. It was brilliant: no inhibitions, just the raw energy and joy of voices and real feeling. I felt the whole place had such an incredible Spirit. This is how the Spirit of God should be enabling life, enabling people to be seen and heard, enabling life in all its fullness.

Today, falling down from the altar, you will all see a vine with many leaves. We made this vine at the service in November when we remembered those who had died street homeless in this rich city – something which should never happen to anyone. On each of the leaves, which people attached, is written the name of someone who died who was either homeless, or had been in hostel accommodation and was known to the homelessness services. Each leaf a name, a life. There are more than two hundred names we remembered who have died in the last year. We believe that no one is abandoned by God, that God is revealed in all and for all. This is the God who names each one of us and comes among us. This is the God who we must recognise, like Simeon recognised – God made flesh among us: touched, seen, heard, held in our hands, seeking a home. This is the God who holds us in his hands and raises us up to find our true home with him – God beheld; God beholding us.

Lord now let your servants go in peace, your words have been fulfilled.
Our eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people...
‘This child is destined for the falling and rising of many.’

In the words which Streetwise Opera are going to sing: ‘There’s a place for us.’