

Union Chapel 09 Oct 2005

Thanks for the invitation to speak today + for being a church that seeks to respond to the needs of homeless people, through your Margins Project and the Islington CWS.

Who am I? brief outline: worked in homelessness field since 1992. UNLEASH/NLAH drop-in/Islington Shelter coordinator 2001/2002. I know Janet, Rob. I also know Mark Shelton, and I belong to the fellowship at All Saints, Barnsbury Parish.

Practicing Christian for almost 20 years, mostly a music/worship leader, but an occasional preacher.

My theme today is the homeless Jesus, or God's incredible generosity. His Superabundant, Profligate, Grace.

Contrast/paradox between this and the need and want we see around us? I don't think so.

What is homelessness?

Info from CHAIN (from Broadway website)

+/- 3000 (3112) people rough sleepers were contacted by outreach teams working in London April 2004 - March 2005. *1402 new contacts* in that period.

+/- 100 in Islington

Most agree that these figures represent tip of the iceberg, but even on this narrow measure, we can see that it has not been solved.

A broader definition – people who are affected by lack of a secure home to live in – is more meaningful

- hidden homeless, sofa surfers, squatters, people living in overcrowded inadequate housing.

Esp. Refugees and people seeking asylum, for whom housing is a huge problem, even if/ when their claim is accepted.

The so-called "A8's"

Crisis recently estimated this larger figure to be about 400,000.

Homelessness is a headline, a sign of our failures, brokenness, fallenness:

- broken relationships – family breakdown - disconnectedness
- Poor mental/physical health – disability (how many homeless people have conditions for which they have never received the appropriate help, such as epilepsy or learning difficulties)
- Effects of drugs/alcohol, crime, unemployment, poverty
- migration

Simply, and most profoundly the absence of – or sometimes a need to walk away from - appropriate caring relationships – A family or community.

So... What has God to say about all this? What do our texts tell us?

God has prepared a feast - in the Isaiah text (25:1-9) it is his covenant people who have reason to praise him, and their enemies - God's enemies - have reason to fear him.

The focus of the writer moves around (so quickly!):

- He praises God's faithfulness
- God's awesome destructive power - "*cities of ruthless nations will revere you*"
- God as refuge for the poor + shelter against the ruthless
- the feast for all peoples - points to Jesus, "destroyer of the shroud" - death
- He will wipe away all tears and disgrace
- and again, leading the people in Rejoicing in God's salvation - v.9

And in Jesus' parable (Matt 22 1-14) the feast is for God's invited guests, but they reject the invitation.

- He tries again, sending details of the wonderful banquet. This time they kill his servants.
- God the Father flies into a rage, and destroys them - like the OT again.
- Invites everyone, all who are hanging about, passing by
- The man not in wedding clothes is rejected
- Many called few chosen.

God's great generosity *does* require a response.

Who are the people in this story?

The Prophets, the people of the Church are his servants, doing the inviting: striving to reach out to the lost, the poor, the hungry i.e. *everyone*.

Always and to everyone God's generosity is available. Who will respond?

Applications

The Church is (or has the potential to be) a radical, prophetic community of Solidarity Most importantly and fundamentally, the gospel challenges us **to love**, to live as representatives of God's incredible, generous love and forgiveness, to stand with and to care about our neighbour, to invite everyone to the Feast - it's not an optional extra!

This gospel message is meant to transform our hearts, our lives, our relationships, communities and our society.

Have we heard it, do we hear it today, and will we put it into practice?

Jesus lived *and lives*, and asks us to live, in opposition to the world and its hierarchies of rich and poor/strong and weak etc. He draws us toward our eternal and unchanging selves, toward living in friendship with God who is our Maker, our Redeemer, sharing our lives with others out of that friendship.

How to engage?

Church networks can be closer and more in touch with the problems in our society than "official" ones + *don't have the investment that public bodies do*

in denying that there is a problem. (E.g. Street counts as a measure of numbers of homeless people). **The Prophetic Role.**

Practical Response Churches willing to commit resources – space, volunteers, money – to provide relief – as this Church does – by providing shelter over the winter months, or a soup run, or drop-in to recently arrived refugees.

Aside: Some say this is not the churches role – other agencies are more equipped to respond with appropriate professional skills and resources. This is an important question. We must examine what else is going on – not just start up a project because it seems like a good idea, without reference or connectedness.

However if a Church does take up this practical challenge, interesting things can follow - - - -

1. Campaigning/Advocacy/Political Role Once churches start doing the emergency relief, the “ambulance work”, you begin to engage with the bigger picture, the causes that lie behind homelessness. (Drowning people in stream) The social injustice begins to hit home when you meet people who are homeless and find out their stories – you can no longer be distanced or theoretical. E.g. -

- The lack of affordable rented housing – this is by far the main reason for homelessness – not people’s personal problems
- Why have we allowed the sell off of council housing, at a time when demand for housing was rising?
- Why is housing – real estate – now viewed primarily as a capital investment, rather than an essential human need, like food, clothes, education or work?

2. Drawing the wider community together What about people who wouldn’t normally (these days) attend a church meeting. (I won’t say “wouldn’t be seen dead in a Church”, because weddings and funerals might be the only time!) They’ve turned their back on the Church as an institution, but they *will* join with churches in community work like this.

Many projects have experienced this – when churches start “rolling up their sleeves” – it makes sense to people who might not even say they had any faith (though their deeds show they do!)

This community work model is strongly promoted by Ann Morrissey, previously London Diocese Comm. Ministry adviser.

She also speaks about this mystery, the “Special place of the poor” in God’s kingdom. That we have as much to learn **from** poor and marginalized people as whatever we might be able to offer them. Anyone who’s ever volunteered in any kind of community setting will recognize the truth of this.

Is this what we mean by the homeless Jesus? When we strive to serve our poor and needy neighbours do we, in a deep sense, meet God?

3. Our own attitudes and (yes) prejudices don't last long when we take down the barriers ourselves.

To exercise God's Grace, as we sometimes need to when trying to help homeless people – let's not romanticize them, or gloss over the difficult encounters – sometimes they are very hard to work with and non-cooperative, aggressive, smelly, ingrates!

Neither do the negative feelings that many homeless people have about church.

I have heard people say – volunteer helpers and homeless people - that they have found their faith again – not because of cleverly put together 3 point sermons (perhaps like this one?) but through their experience of love through the actions of other people, of Christian volunteers.

Faith without deeds, as James says.

Conclusion So Churches that respond to the challenge presented by the needs of the homeless, the poor, the marginalized – that take that risk – will find that there is a real blessing (hidden) in the venture.

I'd like to even go further and put this to you:

Isn't it our relative material well being which is actually the greatest obstacle to faith and obedience? Like the rich young man (in Matthew 19) whom Jesus told to sell everything.

It's what separates us most from each other and from God.

When we are willing to "sell what we have" or – to express that in another way, "move out of our comfort zone (material and spiritual)" - and serve in a shelter, or get on the campaign trail in some way because we are angered by our government's rhetoric but lack of action in providing enough housing or rehab places to help our homeless friends - then we are responding to the gospel call.

When we are willing to lose our life, we will find it.

I mentioned earlier our eternal and unchanging selves.

God is our eternal home: Psalm 90 vs. 1-2:

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

At it's best the Church offers something that is hard to find anywhere else – the love of God to which all men are invited to come home.