

Shelter for the Homeless: Isaiah 30: 15-21; John 14: 1-14

1st May 2019, The Revd Dr Jonathan Arnold

‘In my Father’s house, there are many mansions.’

Where is home for you? Is it where you live now? Is it the place where you were born or grew up? Is it the place in which you no longer live, but is still home in your heart? Is it a place that you have left temporarily to come and live in Oxford, perhaps even to live in Magdalen College?

There are few things quite as important as a sense of home. Somewhere we feel at rest, where we can be ourselves. For some, that place may be somewhere that is yet to be found or has been, for whatever reason, lost. The High Street earlier on today was full of thousands of people celebrating May morning. Now dispersed we might find some of them in pubs, colleges, work places or their own homes. For some others, the streets *is* there home. Like the Son of Man, many on our streets have nowhere to lay their head.

Many years ago, just a few days after we had moved into Garsington Rectory and still had boxes unopened on the floor, the doorbell rang and there, on the doorstep, was a young couple and a baby. Their car had, apparently, run out of petrol and they had nowhere to stay. We invited them in and did what we could. It was a striking and startling way to begin parish life and we wondered if every night would be like this. The couple told us their story as we gave them food and drink, but unsure of what to do in the longer term, I rang my old training vicar, who I felt sure would know all the numbers and contacts to help find this couple more permanent shelter. He did. And this is where things became more complicated. The social services told us that this couple were wanted by the police and before we knew it there were two police constables on the doorstep and the couple had fled, their car miraculously now replenished with petrol. We never saw them again or heard of what happened.

A few months later, when the nights were still freezing cold, as Emma walked to lock the church, she found a middle-aged woman curled up in a sleeping bag in the porch. Julie was travelling west she told us over some food. We knew not why, except that she had fled from Zimbabwe and did not want her past to be known. As I drove her into Oxford the next day in

order to find shelter in one of the many hostels, she became anxious that they would ask her questions. I suspect that she did not stay in an Oxford hostel but carried on walking. Her secrets were not to be shared.

And just a days weeks ago I was speaking to a homeless man on our streets. Patrick had a tale of family breakdown, low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness, he told me, as he sipped his vodka and coke at eight o'clock in the morning. When I went to find him later, he had gone: moved on by shopkeepers or police, I do not know. We may see him again, we may not.

The fact is that the problems are complicated and when we multiply these stories by the number of homeless people we may get a sense of hopelessness ourselves. Or, like the Bishops of the Church of England, start writing open letters on the need for more social justice, entitled 'Who is my neighbour?' The number of homeless in the UK has risen for the seventh year in a row. Behind each case may be a narrative of family problems, addiction, debt or other factors. And beyond our shores there are thousands more being displaced from their homes and trying to find new ones. Even Christ mused that the poor will always be with us.

And yet. And yet. If we give up on mercy, we not only give up on our faith in humanity to do good and not only do we de-humanise others, we fail something divine within us as well. The charity for which we are collecting this term is Emmaus, an organisation that impressively and compassionately helps those who have been homeless back into accommodation and to live independent, stable lives. This is work of mercy.

In his book entitled 'In God's Hands', Desmond Tutu states that the Bible is 'more revolutionary, more subversive of injustice and oppression than any political manifesto or ideology. How so? The Bible asserts ... that each one of us, without exception, is created in the image of God (the *Imago Dei*). Whether you are rich or poor, white or black, educated or illiterate, male or female – each one of us, exhilaratingly, wonderfully, is created in the image of God.' This, says Tutu, makes each one of us a 'God-carrier'.

He goes on: 'If we really believe this assertion, then we would be appalled at any ill-treatment of another human being, because it is not simply unjust but also, shockingly, blasphemous. It is really like spitting in the face of God.'

If we take the essence of the Christian faith seriously, that we are created in God's image and that God became human, a homeless human at that, we would know that we are not called upon to face the agonies and injustices of this world alone, but with the presence of the living God and by his strength and grace. As God-carriers we are bidden to work for the cause of mercy and the kingdom of God on earth now, knowing that Christ's redeeming work was for everyone and for all time.

We hear the prophet Isaiah's comforting words this morning: 'Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more.' And the comforting words of Christ:

'In my father's house are many mansions', says Christ in this morning's reading, 'If it were not so I would not have told you. I go there to prepare a place for you.' Philip, the apostle, is slow to understand, as perhaps we too are sometimes slow to comprehend, that Christ dwells with the Father and if we believe in Christ then we too find our dwelling place in God. Our true dwelling place will be when we fulfil that destiny to live in God's presence and in his loving embrace.

So where is home for you? Well wherever it is, or will be, in this life, it is inevitably temporary. As God-carriers we may not be able to solve all hunger, or thirst, or sickness, or nakedness, or imprisonment or homelessness, or even death. But we are able, surely, to show mercy in the way we live our lives, spend our money, govern our time, and to show mercy to those in need, in this college, in your school, in the workplace, in the city and, through our giving, in the wider country and to those in need in other parts of the world. And let us not attempt these works of mercy because we wish to earn some heavenly reward, but for their own sake, as human beings made in the image of God, recognizing the divine spark in each other that deserves our respect and honour, our care and our love. Let us act in response to the merciful God who is the author of all life. As Isaac Watts penned:

Were the whole realm of nature mine

It were an offering far too small.

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Amen.