



SOUTHWARK JPIC NEWS

Seeking to promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in our Diocese

WINTER 2009

An Eco-friendly way to have a clear out.

Fed up of having all those old things that may be useful one day, and anyway are too good to throw away, but clutter up your home and fill up all the cupboards?

The answer could be to sign up to Freecycle. The Freecycle Network™ is made up of 4,859 groups with 6,760,000 members across the globe. It's a grassroots and entirely nonprofit movement of people who are giving (& getting) stuff for free in their own towns. It's all about reuse and keeping good things out of landfills. Membership is free.

Once you are signed up you can offer anything for free and look on your local site to see what is being offered by others.

To sign up go to www.freecycle.org and enter your location, this will put you on to your local group, there are about 25 in the Southwark Archdiocese.



For those not happy using the internet you could, of course always start a small group in your parish. A supply of cards and a notice board is all the technology you would need.

Now we have our 2010 Dairies

Peace Sunday -17th January
*If you want to cultivate peace,
protect creation*

The theme aims to raise awareness about the strong bond that exists in our globalized and interconnected world between protecting the creation and cultivating peace

... *"If the human family is unable to face these new challenges with a renewed sense of social justice and equity, and of international solidarity, we run the risk of sowing seeds of violence among peoples, and between current generations and those to come... ecological questions must be faced,"*

From Vatican Press Notice



Poverty and Homeless Action Week 30th January to 7th February



To organise an event in your parish to promote Homelessness Sunday on 30th January or Poverty Action Sunday on 7th February download resources from www.actionweek.org or contact the office.

The Age of Stupid - a film everyone should see

Produced over four years by McLibel director Franny Armstrong, The Age of Stupid stars Oscar-nominated actor Pete Postlethwaite as a man living alone in the devastated world of 2055, looking back at old footage from 2008 and asking: why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?

If you would like to borrow a copy to show in a private home please contact the JPIC office. You may also arrange a viewing for a larger group but would have to register with www.ageofstupid.net and pay the appropriate fee. The office will be happy to assist with this.

Fairtrade Fortnight 22nd February to 7th March

Fairtrade Fortnight - The Big Swap will be asking the nation swap their usual stuff for Fairtrade stuff; your usual wine, sugar, or oranges for Fairtrade wine, sugar or oranges. Each swap will be proof that the UK wants developing world producers to get a better deal. To get your parish involved go to their web site www.fairtrade.org.uk for an action pack or contact the office.



Homelessness: on the road to Theology

Alison Gelder, Director of Housing Justice

Housing Justice has a history of theological reflection on homelessness and a responsibility to our members and to the wider Christian community to do this work.

I believe that how we think about, talk about, and what we understand of, God are all shaped by our experiences as well as by age, gender, relationship history, nationality, ethnicity etc etc. So my thoughts may resonate with you, or it may not because your standpoint is not mine.



My own experience of homelessness is mostly second hand, taken from working with and alongside homeless people. However, I have been in the situation of walking away from a relationship and spending some time sleeping on friends' settees, and as a family with three small children we ended up with my parents when there was a few weeks gap between rented properties.

So I have been amongst the hidden homeless, the largest group of homeless people in our country at the moment. There are more than 400,000 people in these sorts of situations, many of them young and often without family support. (In fact there is no accurate and up to date number for the hidden homeless. The figure everyone uses comes from some estimates made by the New Economics Foundation for Crisis in 2004. It includes people sleeping on sofas and floors, in cars and squats, and in the uncomfortable and insecure situation of being a household within a household. The number has surely grown significantly in the last five years...).

I have never myself slept rough but one of the reasons why I am in this line of work is because of the experience of being an overnight volunteer at the Wintercomfort night shelter in Cambridge. So I am not offering a theology from the experience of the 500 or more people who will be sleeping out on the streets across England tonight. Rather I am speaking of how close contact with people in these situations has influenced and affected me.

So, who are homeless people? What are their characteristics and condition? Well, there are different categories of homeless people, but the ones I am concerned with here are those mentioned above – street homeless and hidden homeless. That means they do not have a place they can call their own. No where safe and permanent where they can keep belongings, have some privacy or offer hospitality to others.

They are mainly male but by no means exclusively so. Their ages range from late teens to old age with a bias towards the younger end. Many of them (43% according to the Salvation Army study, Seeds of Exclusion) were emotionally abused as children. The

same study found that more than half spend most of their time alone. They have few friends and limited contact with their families. If they have children it is quite likely that they have no contact with them. Many, but not all, have psychological problems, including drug and alcohol abuse and issues related to bereavement and relationship breakdown. A long term street homeless man who shared his story as part of our "Voices from the Edge" monologues project told us that he spent a lot of time walking around and this sense of being on the move seems to be a common characteristic even if people cover the same route day after day. Their physical health is often poor (and they struggle to get proper medical attention) and life expectancy is short – around 42 for a male rough sleeper.

One of the places where the condition of being homeless links with other theological reflection is in relation to pilgrimage. I have to confess that I am a serial pilgrim. For more than thirty years I have spent Holy Week on the road with a large wooden cross and a mixed group of fellow pilgrims. So I am speaking from my experience of pilgrimage as journey rather than of pilgrimage as arrival and time spent at a shrine. As we walk on these cross carrying pilgrimages, even when we are on roads and passing through towns and villages, we become detached from 'normal' life. There is a strange mixture of freedom from cares and responsibilities (other than continuing to put one foot in front of the other) and a new state of dependence because we are dependent on others for food and refreshment, for places to stay, for toilet facilities and many other things. When I began to volunteer at the night shelter it was at once very clear to me that the condition that I voluntarily embraced for ten days each year was the (mostly) involuntary condition of our guests. For being without homes or (in the majority of cases) work, they were free of many of my own day to day responsibilities. Yet they were dependent on us volunteers, not just for somewhere to sleep but also for making cups of tea, for washing clothes, for switching the lights on or off... They were free but with hugely curtailed choices in life.

Others have written and spoken (and here I am especially indebted to the records of the UNLEASH theology workshops kept by Pat Logan) about homelessness as being a state of exile, or, in the terminology of the anthropologist Victor Turner, a liminal state. In this they have picked up not just the pilgrim state of walking and waiting (and seeking escape and oblivion) but also made a link between the waste land places to which the desert fathers and early hermits retreated. The urban jungle of the modern city is envisaged as a marginal space just as the desert was in the past. The homeless person is understood as someone who can be close to God because they are divested of possessions and the trappings of the material world; as someone who has the time and space for spiritual expression. So there is a strong link with one of the trademark spiritualities of the early Church. There are

inferences here too of monastic practice and of contemporary contemplative spirituality with its clear rejection of twenty first century consumption and continuous communication. Sometimes this is accompanied by an idea that in order to be closer to Jesus we need to experience and share physical suffering.

I have said how research shows that many homeless people spend much time alone. They are often isolated both by their rejection of family and society and by being rejected by their family and by society. Again this can be linked to the situation of the contemplative. There is definitely some truth in all of this. However, there is also a big danger. The danger is that we romanticise the condition of homelessness, seeing rough sleepers as modern day noble savages, and then, possibly, that we support people in remaining homeless, remaining in a condition of suffering, rather than empowering them to change and to move on. Nevertheless by being alongside people who are living as exiles and strangers we can be aware of being in the presence of witnesses to something about the nature of God and of Jesus, without necessarily supporting or endorsing their 'lifestyle'.

I have found that I have learned several things about the life of Jesus through the presence, words and actions of homeless people. In the first place there is a witness to Jesus on the road. There is something, not an exact parallel, but something, about the life of a rough sleeper which is similar to the mix of freedom and dependence which Jesus and his disciples must have experienced on the road in Judea. I think this is in itself worthy of contemplation. Furthermore, in a talk to an UNLEASH group in 1991 Ken Leech spoke of an experience that many of us who have worked with homeless people will recognise; that in this work we become aware of Christ coming among us in the person of the homeless stranger. This was eloquently expressed by Thomas Merton in "Raids on the Un-speakable". Merton said of Christ that "because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room ... with those for whom there is no room Christ is present in this world". So sometimes, not always by any means, but sometimes, in soup runs, night shelters and drop ins, amongst the sweet tea and the cigarette smoke, we glimpse the person of Jesus.

One of the ways in which we are called to follow Jesus is through service; whether service of the destitute as in Matthew 25 or through servant leadership as in John 13. Working with homeless people, provides many opportunities to imitate Christ in this way. One of the reasons volunteers give for providing and serving food at soup runs and shelters is that it is a simple act that clearly does good. It is a physical act. The most profound act of physical service of this kind that I have performed is to wash and massage the feet of a homeless man. It was an intimate physical

gift which comforted and restored, and it felt much more sacramental than the symbolic foot washing that takes place in many of our churches on Maundy Thursday.

To continue the Holy Thursday theme, the stories of homeless people (and they all have stories) often speak in a deep and painful way of being alone and struggling to face an inevitable, unavoidable agony. For me this has suggested a condition of being trapped in the garden of Gethsemane. It is a reflection which illustrates the importance of Jesus' surrender, to both the will of God and to the arresting soldiers,



and it seems to be that only by doing the former could he face the latter. There is so much going on in the Passion narrative that even after years of prayer and study, being alongside people who are fixed in one part of the story can change our perspective and provide new insights. Furthermore it is possible that sharing the story of Jesus' agony in the garden can help those who have been unable to move beyond their solitary pain.

This brings me to the next point of learning. One of the mysteries, the difficult to explain bits, of the resurrection narrative is why Mary Magdalene does not recognise the risen Christ in the garden. Well I am fortunate enough to have met people who were homeless and are now housed, employed and securely settled in society. One of the talks in the UNLEASH archive spoke of people having an 'expression of mature security' which seems to me an excellent description of what is often more prosaically called 'successful resettlement'. These people are physically changed and can be difficult to recognise at first sight. This is not only because they are now healthy and have overcome their addictions but also because there is a new light in their eyes (the light of hope perhaps?). These are people who have been resurrected, brought back from the dead like Lazarus. For me they are sacraments of the resurrection.

There are dangers in romanticising the condition of homelessness, however I think that what is legitimate, even good to do is to explore the sacramental dimen-

sion of work with homeless people. In my description of washing the feet of a homeless man in a night shelter I alluded to a sacramental dimension to the experience. In another of the UNLEASH theology workshops Sr Lynda Dearlove, who is now Director of the Women@thewell project for street sex workers, gave a talk entitled 'A *consecrated cup of tea*'. Lynda spoke of how only today is real for the homeless person and so people working with them need to enter into that today, making the immediate sacramental. When we glimpse the presence of Christ in the now of these encounters, whether foot washing, cups of tea or fragments of conversation, they do become the outward sign of an inner reality, allowing us to see how the presence of God infuses the world. That is a vision that can then inform and enrich participation in the more formal sacramental rituals of our churches.

For me the most important insights are about openness to seeing God in all our encounters and about recognising the vital place of surrender in our relationship with God. To go back to the agony in the garden again, it seems that true progress is impossible for any of us unless we make the step of giving up control to God.

I want to end with a prayer. The words are from Thomas Merton but altered so they speak for us all, housed and homeless alike:

Lord God,
We have no idea where we are going.
We do not see the road ahead of us.
We cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do we really know ourselves,
and the fact that we think we are following your will
does not necessarily mean that we are actually
doing so.
But we believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And we hope we have that desire in all that we do.
We hope that we will never do anything apart from
that desire.
And we know that if we do this,
You will lead us by the right road
though we may know nothing about it.
Therefore we will trust you always
though we may seem lost and in the shadow of
death.
We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you
will never leave us to face our perils alone.
Amen

"IT'S MY BELIEF"

The Justice & Peace group of St Teresa's, Ashford decided in 2008 to explore the core beliefs of other faiths as a means of gaining a greater understanding of our similarities and differences. Their objective was to mount a series of inter-church meetings to be addressed by speakers from different religions. To date they have completed two meetings under the umbrella title of "IT'S MY BELIEF"., the first addressed the Muslim faith and the second examined Hinduism.

Hugh D Davis, group chairman, writes: "We were fortunate that a nationally known Muslim, who lives in the area, agreed to be our first speaker. Invitations were sent to all the Churches Together in Ashford. In the event some 60 people turned up on the night representing a total of 12 different churches in and around Ashford. We were treated to a carefully prepared exposition of the central tenets of Islam. Following questions from the floor observations by members of the audience provided the justification for our journey into another world. One audience member observed that the "*lecture had been inspirational because it was the first time I have heard about Islam from a Muslim*". A second commented "*You see—there is only one God*".

We felt we had achieved at least some of our objectives, amongst which were education, understanding and tolerance. This gave us the encouragement to plan our second evening. A prison chaplain was recommended and agreed to undertake the task. Her knowledge of Hinduism, her ability to relate it to Christianity, the numerous religious objects she brought with her and her sense of humour ensured a successful interesting and instructive evening for an audience of similar size. Our venue was abuzz with questions and discussions continued well after her contribution had concluded. Many of her listeners took away a leaflet on the "Key Facts of Hinduism".

Where next? If justification for our journey towards a greater understanding of faith in its different forms is needed the words of Archbishop Nichols at his enthronement are surely relevant:

"let us be a society in which we genuinely listen to each other, in which reasoned principles are not construed as prejudice and in which we are prepared to attribute to each other the best and not the worst motives"

Thanks to Hugh and the Ashford group for sharing this excellent initiative with us. I am always pleased to receive reports from parish J&P groups and will endeavour to put them in our newsletters.