

Advent 1 2020

1 Cor 1:3-9

Homelessness

Advent means quite literally, the arrival of a notable person or thing. In the Church Advent is one of our two main seasons of fasting and reflection. A time to meditate on the Word, take stock of our faith and how we put it in to action. A time to remember that God Himself became flesh, incarnate, one of us, one with us. A time to remember that His advent at Christmas led inexorably to His death on Calvary and His resurrection at Easter. A time to reflect that He has promised to return and in the light of His return to think about how we work out our salvation in fear and trembling. Not that we work for our salvation, Jesus has done all that was needed for us to receive the free gift of salvation, we can't earn it. But now that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God expecting our King to return at any time, how do we live and work for His Glory?

We don't know when He will come, it could be tomorrow, it could be another hundred or another thousand years. But we have been told that, like the wise virgins, we must always be ready. What does that look like, what does it mean to you?

I used to help run a town wide Monthly Youth Service and the wife of the local Elim Church minister was on the team. She once told me that when she was a teenager she was never allowed to go dancing or to the cinema in case the Lord came back and found her dancing or watching a film. The leaders in her Church had a very strange idea of who Jesus is and what He is like. This is the man who was accused of going to parties and socialising with drunks and prostitutes! I once had a postcard that I loved. It said: Jesus is coming, look busy! Well I think He would rather find me dancing than pretending to work for His Kingdom when I am not.

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What is Kingdom work, what is it that is expected of us? Well primarily of course to tell the Good News of God's love and Salvation through faith in Jesus. But also to do good whenever and wherever we can. To do those good works which He has prepared for us to do. And if we are willing, there really is no shortage of work to be done. We know that God's heart is for the poor, we know from Micah 6 that He wants us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with Him. For us to act justly, that means us living according to His ways, to love mercy means that whatever judgments we might make about other people and how they may have brought their circumstances upon themselves or about the way they love and the things they do and say, we remember that God had mercy on us, God forgave us and if we want to walk humbly with Him we must remember that we are not better than or higher than or more deserving than any other person. Over Advent this year it has been suggested that we think about Homelessness. So we are going to look at different aspects of homelessness and its causes. This week I am going to talk a bit about homelessness and then next week we are going to talk about poverty, Advent 3 we will look at Societal breakdown and on the 20th refugees. These are not comfortable subjects, hopefully they will challenge us and help us to think about what our responses should be. The Advent Theme for today is Hope and I guess to find yourself homeless is just about the most hopeless situation to be in. When I talk about homelessness, it is not just about rough sleeping, that is perhaps the worst but according to Shelter last year there were around 3 in 10 people in the UK living in unaffordable, insecure or unsuitable homes. That is 3.6 million children, 9.2 million working age adults and 2 million pensioners. That can be anything from being physically homeless and sofa surfing, to overcrowding, to living in fear of

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eviction because of being unable to pay the rent and getting in to more and more debt. People, including families with children being housed in B & Bs and cooking on a camping stove, people reliant on hostels and shelters.

I have a few more facts for you. Try not to shut off because it is overwhelming or because you feel helpless. We all need to hear these things.

In 2017 almost 600 people died while sleeping rough. Last winter I believe that 3 people died in Hastings.

The average age of death was just 44 for men and 42 for women, compared with 76 for men and 81 for women in the general population.

A rough sleeper is 9 times more likely to commit suicide than the average person.

There has been a 165% increase in rough sleeping since 2010.

170,000 families and individuals are experiencing the worst forms of homelessness in Britain and this is expected to double in the next 25 years unless there is a change.

92% of private rents in Britain are unaffordable for single people, couples or small families who receive support through local housing allowance. Housing Benefit no longer guarantees to cover all of your rent, it is capped, but rents are not.

Nearly 9,000 people are estimated to be sleeping in tents, cars and on public transport in the UK.

Every year more than 15,000 young people across the UK ask for help with homelessness.

1 in 6 prisoners report being homeless before they are taken in to custody.

Only 6% of homeless people are in employment.

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72% have mental health issues. That surprised me to be honest – I would have thought it would be higher.

56% have long term physical health issues and 26% use drugs – again I expected that to be higher.

This is the reality in our country today. For the time being at least, the 6th wealthiest country in the world. Something is clearly broken. It is easy to be overwhelmed when we hear statistics like these. It is too much, it feels like there is nothing that we can do. However doing something, anything is better than doing nothing. I am sure you know the famous story of a man on a beach that is covered with dying starfish which have been stranded. He comes across a small boy picking up starfish one by one and throwing them back in to the sea. That is hopeless, the man remarks, there are thousands of these starfish you cannot possibly save them all. The boy picks up another starfish and throws it in the sea. “I saved that one” he replies.

We can't always help. Many of you are aware that we had a chap sleeping in the church porch for a couple of weeks. We did our very best for him, spoke with the outreach worker from Seaview who is working with him. But he was offered accommodation and turned it down and sadly we were advised by the police that he has a history of violence. He was at times extremely abusive, even to those trying to help him and in the end we were advised by Seaview and the police to tell him he couldn't stay any longer. I have been assured that accommodation is available for him and he will be offered accommodation in different areas but we do not have the skills needed to help someone with complex mental health problems including addiction. We can only do our best. And that might mean giving to charities such as Seaview and Shelter, it might mean buying food and drink for someone sleeping

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rough, it might mean challenging your MP to promote and vote for policies that will improve the conditions that lead to someone ending up on the streets. We are going to look in the next couple of weeks at a couple of the underlying issues, poverty and societal breakdown. Jesus wants to see us being the people of hope that He has called us to be. I will finish with a story of hope. We had a couple sleeping in a tent in our Church garden in Hastings. We made them welcome and we had facilities they could use. A church member paid for them to move to a proper campsite with showers and we worked with Christians against Poverty to get them in to a flat, raising the money for the deposit and people donated the things they needed to furnish it. I like to think we saved those two.

I do encourage you to go back and read our reading for today again and maybe reflect on how it might relate to what I have been talking about.