

It was an ordinary day. Word came through that a woman wearing a wedding dress was wandering around Nottingham. At Emmanuel House our interpretation of such a story is that this may be a person in distress. She found her way to Emmanuel House, wandered in as anyone can access services at Emmanuel House. It was evident she was mentally ill. On this occasion she stayed for fifteen minutes and then left. The following day she arrived at Emmanuel House before opening-time and as she waited outside, proceeded to take her clothes off in the street. The staff intervened and persuaded her to come in. They contacted other agencies to see if she was receiving services elsewhere. She was clearly vulnerable and at risk and she was rough sleeping. Women who are homeless and rough sleeping are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. We eventually found out that she had been living in supported accommodation in Nottinghamshire, having been diagnosed with two mental illnesses. It took us two weeks to get the services she needed to connect with her. Eventually a Psychiatrist, Community Psychiatric Nurse and Social Worker met with her. Their assessment of her was that she was not ill enough for intervention. The following day we heard that the police had found her wandering in and out of the traffic on the Nuthall Road and she was sectioned under the mental health act. Emmanuel House staff were relieved because she would get the supported she needed but a few days later we heard she was a missing person. I don't know what happened to her since then.

In September the national Audit office published a scathing report about the government response to homelessness. It criticises ministers for taking what it calls a "light touch" approach. **"It is difficult to understand why the Department [for [Communities and Local Government](#)] persisted with this approach in the face of such a visibly growing problem".**

In the past week the new number for people rough sleeping in Nottingham which is sent to the Government for national statistics was set at 43. This is an increase on last year when the number was 35 and an increase on 2015 when the number was 13. This is an increase in rough sleeping in Nottingham of 230% in two years. All the data you can find on the internet regarding homelessness nationally shows equally large increases.

Comparatively speaking the City Council has done well to preserve some budget allocation to homelessness services and this winter, Emmanuel House and the Winter Shelter has become more integrated into a collective response across the city to helping people find solutions to their homelessness. As well as providing emergency accommodation, where possible we are working to enable people to reconnect to the communities where they have a local connection which triggers the statutory help that they need. However for many different reasons people do not fit neatly into self evident categories, maybe because they are ill, or they are afraid or they have lost all motivation or hope. It is Emmanuel House as the only open access service of its kind in the City that is able to welcome people with the

most complex of needs, help them move out of the situations that take away their dignity and share their journey to restoration. As a community we all need to understand that the disadvantage we see homeless and vulnerable people living with, are mostly givens and are not the consequence of laziness and bad decisions.

A few weeks ago a charity call the **CEO sleep out** organized a fundraising event for CEOs, senior managers and the like to raise money by sleeping out for the night. When folk gathered in the evening there was a strong sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm. The following morning there was a lot of reflection with one person acknowledging that while one night was an achievable challenge, if he had to do it three nights in a row he acknowledged it would affect his mental health. His anecdotal predication resonates with research which evidences that if you are homeless you will almost certainly become mentally ill. Homelessness by definition is a trauma and the question then is how do you obliterate the experience of the trauma. Many turn to drugs or alcohol to do so.

Often Emmanuel House finds itself working with people who do not fit neatly into the criteria set by services. The journey we share with them often starts between a beneficiary's rock and hard place. Sometimes we confront and challenge other services about what they say they are not able to do. We find ourselves standing outside the system which is often too sanitized to be able to cope with the image of God as presented in a homeless person.

When Fr Roger Killeen founded Emmanuel House he underpinned it with principles of **“Catholic Social Teaching and the obligation to provide justice for all, with a special commitment to the poor to enable them become active participants in the life of society. Deprivation and powerlessness wounds the whole community and are healed by solidarity with and between the poor.”**

While we seldom talk about it, everybody working in Emmanuel House signs up to those principles. There is welcome for all and there is compassion. Compassion such as the example of the member of staff pleading the case of someone who had never been homeless before, had had a good job but through circumstances was faced with sleeping rough last Thursday night which was so bitterly cold. They were able to persuade the system to bend so he could access a safe warm bed for the night.

This compassion reflects something of the compassion Jesus has for so many of the people he meets. It's not a mild concern but comes from the depths of his very being. It could be described as gut-wrenching. It is the kind of compassion from which we cannot help but respond to people who are poor in whatever way. And Jesus is clear that when you feed one who is hungry, you feed him. Through a Christological prism the person who is homeless is Jesus who is homeless. It is Jesus that is on the street looking dishevelled. **We believe that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being,**

including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”

And this is regardless of who they are, where they come from, what they have done or their economic circumstances.

Although we don't talk about it, it is this principle that sets Emmanuel House apart in remaining open and accessible to anyone who needs the service.

This belief holds empathy with the individual but it is also embedded in the wider vision of what the Kingdom of God means. This vision of the Kingdom includes what Jesus had in mind - total liberation and freedom, the kind of which we, from within our limitations, cannot deliver. This Kingdom is ultimately a gift from God that comes amidst our own disbelief that the evil we confront cannot be overcome because sometimes the problem is so big we just don't know how we will overcome it. But nevertheless we do pray 'Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven'.

This morning's Gospel reading is preceded in the same chapter of Mark by a question asked by Peter, James, John, Andrew. To paraphrase they ask 'When cometh the hour?' There then follows a description of all sorts of signs and catastrophes. And then Jesus tells them that no one knows the day nor the hour - only the Father. We won't know "when cometh the hour?"

This question and response comes in the context of how Jesus and the disciples would have understood time. Our concept of time is that it is a **quantitative** linear sequential number of periods that are filled by activities and events as depicted literally by the use of calendars and diaries. Jesus' understanding of time would have been that time is '**quality**'. What was important to Jesus and his disciples, is knowing what kind of time it might be. Their interpretation of the now was in the light of what God was going to do and this governed the quality of time. What God will do in the future determines the present now. This is very different to our idea of time where we do one thing that we build on to do another. There is no separation between what is happening now and what God will do in the future. As so beautifully illustrated in John's Gospel.

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one--as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

If we are one relationship with God we are also one in God's time.

Through this lens our understanding is informed as to what the Kingdom of God means and how we are called to build it. The act of bringing in the Kingdom is to bring in a quality, or a

new state. To bring about a change. The Lord's Prayer we pray Thy Kingdom Come. The very idea of 'Coming' is a transition or a conversion. This conversion is the change that Jesus calls us to make. To feed the poor so they are not hungry, to look after the widow so she is not vulnerable, and to go and make disciples of all nations so that they may know salvation. As a church you have committed to this particular call, as you look ahead to transform the community in a new and relevant way.

The second point we see through his lens is that the very act of making a change that Jesus calls us to make is in itself the Kingdom. To feed, to share the Gospel, to be alongside, to challenge injustice are in themselves of the Kingdom.

Thirdly, when the gift of signs of the Kingdom becomes evident, while they may be momentary for the causal observer, in the Kingdom they are eternal. The marvellous monetary contribution you have made to Emmanuel House over the years is an eternal mark of the Kingdom. The very acts of raising the money, the acts of donating, that funded the interventions that have helped people move out of homelessness are timeless marks of the Kingdom. In other words the contributions you have made over the years may be physically spent but they remain potent in the lives of people who have benefited and so are eternal in the Kingdom.

Jesus' idea of the Kingdom is a timeless message about a timeless idea. It's what we call vision. Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. God will have the last word and it is that last word that means we never lose heart and we never lose hope. Contrast this with the words of Paul who has been homeless for the past eight months...

“There's so much disappointment that you can't think about the future, and you're desperately trying not to think about the past, so you think about the next sandwich and leave it at that.”

With the support you provide, his life, along with many others, is changed from that void of despair to one of hope and purpose which are of the Kingdom.

Our Gospel reading challenges us to stay awake for we know not the hour. We come to church Sunday by Sunday to remember that it is God who has the last word and it is that word that energises us to carry on, to remain fast to the vision of the Kingdom. It is God's last word that shapes our today, God's last word that is inseparable to our relationships and actions.

In Advent we light candles to symbolise the light of Christ. The support you provide for Emmanuel House and the acts of kindness to which you commit is the light of Christ.