

“What can I do to help the homeless?”

For 6 weeks now I’ve been chaplain for Cambridge Churches Homeless Project, and that is the question that I’ve been asked most often.

“I’d love to do something, but I just know never what to do! What can I do to help the homeless?”

Today, on Homelessness Sunday, it’s worth thinking about that question.

So, to start, here’s a pretty challenging suggestion straight from the mouth of Jesus:

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

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I’m deliberately waiting here because Jesus has said it all. That’s it.

If we want to live in a world without homelessness, we could all be part of the radical solution Jesus offers, if we redistributed our wealth and lived for the Kingdom of God alone.

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.... then come, follow me.”

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For any of you feeling awkward or unsettled by this, let me tell you that I haven’t sold my possessions and given my money to the poor either.

When I go to a homeless drop-in centre and someone says to me

“So, have you got a house for me?” I answer, “I’m sorry, no I don’t.”

I’m in the same boat as you, even as chaplain to the homeless community.

“I’d love to do something, but I never know what to do! What can I do to help the homeless?” is what people ask.

But what almost everyone, including me, is actually asking is:

“Apart from selling what I own, and giving my money to the poor, what can I do for the homeless?”

Now that’s still a good and worthy question, but in recent weeks I’ve begun to think about it differently.

I wonder if we wouldn’t get further in our thinking by turning the question on its head?

Rather than asking “what can I do to help the homeless?” what about asking “what can the homeless do to help me?”

To explain this, let’s go back to the beginning of our gospel story.

As Jesus is setting out on a journey, a rich man comes up to him.

Now this is a man who’s seen as a total success story by the society around him.

He has wealth. He has power. He has status. In the parallel passage in Luke there’s even a suggestion that he is “a ruler”

But more than this, he’s also a man of good religious standing.

As we learn, the rich man is observant of the central Jewish laws, very faithfully in fact.

“I have kept all these commandments you name since my youth,” he proudly tells Jesus.

It’s beginning to seem as though this rich man has got it all sorted.

He has success materially. He has success religiously. A model man, you might say.

Only, that’s not quite the case. As Jesus knows, and as the man himself knows somewhere deep down, this isn’t the full story.

All this earthly success *isn’t* eternal life. It’s not treasure in heaven. It’s not the peace of God - that peace which the world cannot give.

Jesus says:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’

Here, in one sentence, Jesus turns the rich man’s self-understanding on its head.

And he does this by using one, important, 4-letter word: “lack”

Because in the conversation so far, there’s been no hint of the rich man lacking anything!

He is rich in worldly possessions. He is rich in status. He is rich in right observance of religious laws.

But paradoxically, all this abundance has created in him **a lack** of what is most important.

The rich man lacks a trust in those things he can’t see or can’t own or can’t control.

He lacks being at peace with his own **dependent** human nature. There’s no sense of his own neediness in his answers. There’s no acknowledgment of his own vulnerability.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ he has asked Jesus, because he wants to be able to work and strive for even that which he cannot see, in the life beyond.

The rich man, it seems, has been striving to find assurance of eternal life through his own power. Through getting rich and through being a devout believer.

But all this striving has actually become his greatest obstacle to spiritual freedom and peace.

He has put his trust in earthly things, not in the provision of God, who has created him, and in whose divine love he lives and moves and has his being.

The rich man goes away “grieving”, we hear “for he had many possessions.”

He had wanted to trust in God through Jesus, but for now the temptation remains too great to trust in the signs and objects of his **own** worldly power.

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As I said some moments ago, I wonder if this understanding of the rich man's conversation with Jesus can help us to consider the question "what can the homeless do to help me?" which is perhaps a humbler and more profound question than "what can I do to help the homeless?"

Because in spending time with those experiencing homelessness, we are confronted with real material lack and neediness.

"There but for the grace of God go I," many people say. And that's right.

Seeing someone without a home, we are forced to revisit our own fundamental vulnerability and dependency in all things material.

(Once you've met well-educated lawyers and businesspeople who've lost everything, you realise that all the more.)

But more than that, coming into meaningful relationship with people experiencing homelessness confronts us with our own vulnerability on an even deeper level. And I wonder if that isn't the scarier thing?

Getting to know people struggling to keep a roof over their heads forces us to consider thoughts like this...

"That woman I meet volunteering at the soup kitchen gets angry when things don't go her way. No wonder she keeps getting kicked out of hostels.... But then again, I can get angry when I feel out of control and scared.... And I wonder how I would act in her shoes, with all she's been through?"

Or we might be forced to think....

"That man sleeping in the doorway seems to have such low self-confidence. He always looks away in shame when I try to say hello.... But then again, when I'm at my lowest, I know I feel a shame that makes me

want to run away from everything. My word, how would I react in his place, there in that doorway?”

In meaningful encounter with people experiencing homelessness, we are confronted with our own human vulnerability. We are put in touch with our own fragility and finitude. So if we let it, the encounter teaches us more about what it is to be human – because humans “lack”.

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“Jesus, looking at the rich man, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing.’

So often, our world doesn’t want to accept or acknowledge that there is lack.

We are told to be strong, to be proud, to be independent.

People experiencing homelessness have often had to give up on that illusion. They are forced to live with an acute awareness of their vulnerability to and dependence on others.

That basic vulnerability and dependence is something common to us all – but ironically, most of us want to avoid acknowledging it.

Thank God that in the eyes of Jesus, “lack” isn’t something to be scorned or despised.

Knowing that we are vulnerable, dependent, that we “lack” is actually the doorway to divine love.

“Jesus, looking at the rich man, **loved him** and said, ‘You lack one thing.’

My prayer today is that each of us - housed, un-housed or vulnerably housed - might not be ashamed of whatever it is that we lack.

Because where we can be honest about that lack, we will see Jesus looking back at us, loving us.

Amen.