



PARISH OF FINCHAMPSTEAD AND CALIFORNIA

WEEK 5 – FROM 6 APRIL 2014

LENT WELL SPENT ***... with the homeless***

General Comment

Two weeks ago we were thinking about poverty in general, at home and abroad. Homelessness is a particularly extreme form of poverty, particularly in a society and culture where having a home is the norm (our theme from last week). To be homeless in such a society is bad enough, but to be deprived of home or land, and to be made a refugee must be worse. The readings emphasise God's special concern for such people on the far margins of society and the obligation of generosity on those who are comfortably placed.

Bible Readings – Ezekiel 34. 11-16

¹¹ For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

2 Corinthians 8. 1-2 & 9-14

¹ We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ⁹ For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹ now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹² For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³ I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

Luke 14. 16-24

¹⁶ Jesus said, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." ¹⁹ Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." ²⁰ Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." ²² And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." ²³ Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Context and comment on the parable

In chapter 14, Luke gathers together various elements of Jesus' teaching illustrated by meals and feasting. After healing a man with dropsy on the Sabbath at the house of a leading Pharisee (v1-6), thereby establishing a context of controversy, Jesus criticises the folly of those who take the best seats at a feast (v7-11). Then comes this parable which seems to be similarly provocative towards accepted behaviour.

Questions on the Bible readings

1 How do you react to the reading from Ezekiel? In what ways do you find this metaphorical approach (God as a shepherd, the people as his flock) helpful or unhelpful?

2 How comfortable are you with the stark implications of v16 (... the fat and the strong I will destroy)?

3 How do you react to the reading from 2 Corinthians? How persuasive do you think Paul's writing would have been? Which verse do you consider the most significant in this passage?

4 How do you react to the reading from Luke? How realistic is it as an account of an actual situation? Why did the original guests refuse to attend? How do you explain the compulsion in v23?

5 What points is Jesus trying to make in the parable? Which are most important? Who particularly was he aiming his comments at, and why?

6 How subversive would his original audience have found Jesus' teaching – eg the flouting of social convention by the original guests, and then even more by the host in inviting those who could never repay his hospitality: the poor and homeless?

Questions about ourselves

7 Which character in the parable do you identify with most? From that character's perspective, what does Jesus seem to be saying?

8 How compelling do you find the parable as a story? Or how unsettling? What is your reaction to any deeper meanings you identified (qn 5)?

9 Elsewhere Jesus said, 'The poor are always with you'. Is that a justification for poverty and homelessness in our society?

10 How do you respond to Big Issue sellers? To hard-luck sellers at the door? To beggars?

11 How far is homelessness in this country the fault of those who are homeless, or of society, culture or political decisions?

12 What is an appropriate Christian response to these issues – as individuals and as churches?

13 Refugees are often forced from their homes and land by war, famine or natural disaster. What is our obligation to them, if any?

14 What is your attitude to political refugees seeking asylum in this country? Should we treat them differently from other would-be immigrants? What would a Christian immigration policy look like?

15 To what extent do you feel that your answers to these questions are shaped by your upbringing, instinct, cultural norms or Christian faith?

Homelessness today in the UK

Crisis ... found that reasons most often cited by homeless men were relationship breakdown, substance misuse, and leaving an institution (prison, care, hospital etc.). For homeless women, the most common causes were physical or mental health problems and escaping a violent relationship.

There are also problems in wider society that can contribute towards homelessness. These structural causes might include a lack of affordable housing; high levels of poverty, unemployment or worklessness; the way in which the benefits system operates; or the way social housing is rationed.

Whatever the causes of an individual's homelessness, the consequences can be brutal. Homelessness damages people's capability through loss of skills, through an inability to think about employment whilst worrying about housing, and through their health becoming impaired whilst homeless. Homelessness also damages people's resilience, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Alongside the lack of informal support networks, isolation and loneliness are common among people who are homeless. A third of homeless men reported that their only daily contact was with service providers, and more than half of homeless people said they had no 'family ties' ... almost 38% of homeless people said they spent their entire day alone.

From **Crisis** website: www.crisis.org.uk/