

## HOMELESSNESS

**PREACHER : The Ven Peter Lock, Archdeacon**

Sunday, July 5<sup>th</sup> 2009  
**Emmaus Charity Evensong**

3.15pm  
Rochester Cathedral

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I first met Joan when she called at my Vicarage front door when I was parish priest in Dartford. She was, to say the least, dishevelled, a real mess, with her hair tangled, a coat torn and the usual plastic bags with an assortment of bits and pieces that would have graced most litter bins. Now: clergy are used to the stories that many tell them when they call unexpected at the front door. We know that they are wanting money which will be spent on drugs or alcohol. The story about the need for a rail ticket to Edinburgh or (more cheaply) Dover for a sudden emergency, or the unpaid electricity bill normally ends with a request for money to fund the journey or pay for the metre key or whatever. Sometimes request for food is made: but I have also had to negotiate which sort of pickle is to be used and what sort of bread. And why not? I like pickle in my sandwiches so why shouldn't they. But Joan was different. She had not energy for even some cock and bull story. She obviously was living rough, and had not had a wash for sometime. A cup of tea was all she wanted. We duly gave her a cuppa and she left, dragging her bags with her.

Some time later, a month or so, so she was back. Unfortunately we were away at the time, and because no one answered her knock on the door she became angry, very angry, and picked up a stone and hurled it through the side window by the front door. She then scuttled away, only observed by my daughter who was returning from shopping. She rang the curate who managed to get the window repaired before the police arrived who had been told there had been an incident and the window broken. Of course, as the window had been repaired, they wondered whether this all a hoax call and various checks were made and questions asked. Joan in a few seconds of temper had created mayhem. And was nowhere to be seen!

A few weeks later Joan turned up again. I don't know how she knew we were out, but we were. My churchwarden was driving into the car park by our vicarage as Joan picked up a larger boulder than last time and despite shouts from the churchwarden, hurled it through the window. They didn't call the police, but the insurance company were puzzled about this sudden spate of broken windows. I told them that Joan had been at work again.

About six months passed and there had been no news of Joan. I have to say that Sue and I wondered whether she had died. But then came the knock on the front door. I opened it and there standing in front of me was a bright bonny faced lady with her hair in bunches wearing a pretty floral dress. 'Hello', she said. 'Do you remember me?' I looked hard. 'Joan?' I said. 'Yes', she said. 'How could I forget you' I said, nodding towards the window. 'Oh, yes sorry about that', she said. 'Can I have a cup of tea and could I use your phone to ring me Dad?'

She came in and we heard her story about how a church group in London had taken her in and helped her put her life back together again. It rather put me to shame with just the offer of a cup of tea. But it showed me how a community responded to her need and no matter how desperate the situation is - it is redeemable – but it needs the help of others, the vital strength of community.

We never saw Joan again: but I'm always grateful for our encounter and what she taught me and shared with me. It also helped the window repair industry in Dartford!

Many of us will not have experienced that sort of despair which goes with homelessness. But from my very brief encounter with those who find themselves homeless not out of choice but out of

circumstance it is often a symptom of some other situation in life which has the air of tragedy about it. I recall being on a course to do with Urban Ministry many years ago when we were asked to spend two days and nights in London with 75p only in our pockets. With nowhere to sleep other than park benches or a railway station (I got moved on in Victoria) I sought out the places where you might get a free cup of tea. There is a Methodist centre in the Kingsway which I can highly commend. I went there on my second day and eventually got into conversation with one of the helpers there when I had to admit I was on a course. The helper looked at me and said - 'I would never have known... you look very convincing!' By then I hadn't shaved or washed..... need I say more?

The thing is – when you are homeless it doesn't take long for the world to turn upside down; and even a bottle of milk, standing untouched and unnoticed outside someone's front door early in the morning assumes a huge temptation. It was on that course that I also met professional people who for various reasons to do with broken relationships, pressure of work, alcohol and so on had found themselves on the streets.

If we are serious about tackling homelessness then the Emmaus concept of people living together in community, working together and supplying a service – whether it is refurbishing furniture, growing plants to sell or running a café, and the companions finding themselves gradually being rebuilt so that they regain a sense of true worth – this for me has a strong basis for sustained growth. Community and companionship.

I am reminded too that those words resonate strongly with story of the people of God in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. At Harvest in the OT the people of Israel are to remind themselves of their roots: having presented the priest with the first fruits they are to recite:

*My father was a homeless Aramaean who went down to Egypt and lived there with a small band of people, but there became a great, powerful and large nation.<sup>1</sup>*

It was a journey of faith undertaken from God. It required, too, the development of a community and companionship and in its finest flowering was one where all the peoples of the world had a place and could find a home.

The NT too is about being a people under God. The need for the disciples to become the church was a call to be a people, in a sense in succession to or fulfilment of the calling of the people of Israel. They too traced their roots back to Abraham and saw their story in direct line with the story of the people of Israel. The sharing of bread, the Eucharistic meal, was literally their companionship because that's what companionship means: from the French *comme pain* – as, with bread, the sharing of bread.

The Emmaus Medway group seeks to enable such a community to be set up here, for it to be a community and be a part of the community wherever it might be set. Whilst we are still in the progress of finding the premises this has not been without a great deal of effort from some those involved.

One day – I hope soon – we shall have an Emmaus community and will find that we will have much to learn from the companions. Those we have met from the other communities which are already playing their part, in Dover and Brighton eg, have shown what a great witness they make to us all about the capacity for human recovery. Just as Joan showed me those years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 26.5