

Sunday Worship for 4th July 2021
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
From Holy Trinity Tottenham
'Homelessness and Rough Sleeping'

SERMON

Mark 6. 1-13

The Rt. Rev Bishop Rob Wickham Bishop of Edmonton, Commissary Bishop of Portsmouth and Chair of the national charity, Housing Justice

Nigel was sleeping under a pile of bin bags in the corner of a rundown parking area just off the High Street. It was raining and he was shivering from the cold wet rain. He was hiding under the rubbish and he was very, very frightened. Last night when he was trying to get to sleep, several people shouted at him telling him that he was a scrounger and all he needed to do was to get a job. That happened most nights, but it was the combination of a brick being lobbed directly at him, to then waking up to find a woman in a posh dress squatting on him, urinating, clearly having had too much to drink, whilst her group of friends stood some way off on the pavement laughing. Perhaps she didn't know he was there, or perhaps she did. Alison was walking past and she noticed the bin bags rustling. And wondering if this was a stray cat or possibly rats, she decided that she would take a closer look. Pulling back one bin bag she saw a hand, and fear gripped her. Shaking, she peeled back another, and saw Nigel's face. Both faces looking at one another.

Both unable to move because of fear. The implications of this moment were enormous. Alison knew that the heating was on in church, just up the road, getting ready for the Sunday morning. So she called the priest, and together they made some hot food and gave Nigel an inside space to sleep in. Not glamorous, but safe. The next morning Nigel had gone. The priest said Mass, but the events of the night before seem to dominate their after service coffee. People couldn't believe what had taken place, but as ever, they each went back to their own way, back to the comfort of their own homes. Yet that night, Nigel returned with a friend, and a night shelter was born. Nigel began to share something of his life. Gosh, it felt weird for him. He couldn't remember the last time he was actually listened to and taken seriously.

He'd done okay at school, had parents who loved him. He left home, got a job, was married, had two children, but then he started to gamble. A bit of fun at first, but then it got serious. Seriously gamble. Soon after a while, his wife noticed that his behaviour changed and she thought nothing of it. Nigel had secretly asked for help from his parents, his friends, but they all shut the door once they realised where their money was going. His wife's anger erupted when the bailiffs arrived. And the children's TV, the toys, and the car were taken away.

She kicked him out onto the street and he had nowhere to go. Subsequently, he lost his job and as a youngish man, was not deemed to be vulnerable. Okay to fend for himself. Things got worse very quickly. Wow. It felt good for him to talk now. Nigel's story is sadly common. Mental health issues, relationship breakdowns, addictions, abusive relationships, short-term cash flow, removal of benefits, bereavement, a sudden crisis. Well, these are all reasons for street homelessness, for sofa surfing, for hostel living, whatever it might be. And quite often, rejection. Rejection by loved ones, rejection by employers, rejection by councils, rejection by government, rejection by society. Jesus was of course rejected in his own hometown. He was deeply humiliated and shouted at. Even his neighbours were not able to call him by his proper name. "This isn't the carpenter, the Son of Mary, not even the Son of Joseph, and a far cry from the Son of God" as proclaimed in Mark's prologue. You'll remember some chapters earlier when Mark declares the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And you'll all remember also, sometime later in Chapter 15, when the centurion who'd watched Jesus die, suddenly declares. "Truly, this was Son of God."

This is Mark's gospel, beginning, middle, and end. Jesus in his own town suffering a deep humiliation from, well, no doubt, good and well-meaning people, perhaps like you and me. You know, we don't always humiliate others do we? And we only shout out rude names to others when perhaps we driving or behind closed doors, or when we're looking at the news, or looking at social media. It's not as if we throw bricks at others in extreme circumstances, physically, mentally, online, or forcefully when we feel rejected. Telling someone, I'm sure just in our heads, to 'p' off. Rejection is very destructive. It's a powerful force as Nigel will tell you. So let's see what happens in Mark's gospel. Jesus, having received such rejection becomes the role model. And he organises, he brings action, not endless discussion groups. The twelve are called, they're sent out to change society through reconciliation, build community two by two. They're given God's authority and are told to immerse themselves amongst everyday people. "Take no possessions, no unneeded money, accept local hospitality.

Be as those around you, not more important." And there are implications if you're not treated with dignity. Shake the dust off your feet, if you're not welcomed as a non-violent act of reprisal, a symbol of encountering an opposition of hatred. Be people of healing, of love, and of grace. Jesus is showing us a better way of responding to rejection. Jesus is showing us a precursor of the cross where the ugliness of rejection, of betrayal, and separation are all laid bare. Jesus defeats our death in the process, takes our place, brings us liberation. So we don't have to judge the misfortunes of others as a consequence, even reject them. In the cross and resurrection, God takes a decisive action of love. This is not about endless discussion groups.

On the cross God responds to Nigel's heartache, brings Alison, brings healing, builds community, and restores hope. For Alison's church, this was a Kairos moment, a fresh renewal to partner with Jesus Christ, with a vision for a transformed society. They've recognised that housing, indeed regeneration, are deeply rooted in baptism theology. Therefore, a gospel issue.

They took to heart that decent and affordable housing is not just a luxury for the rich to exploit the poor, but a root of livability, dignity, and human flourishing. They campaigned, and they grew. They grew, and they campaigned. It was almost as if they were washing feet and being blessed in the process. So next time you walk through a car park, be careful. Jesus remains the role model, bringing actions, meeting with people in their deepest anguish, Jesus too remains in the busyness of organising, to bring healing, building community, and restoring hope. We've seen this time and time again, especially in this pandemic. Although, I pray next time, that it won't be Alison's curiosity which is ignited. I pray that it may be yours. Now I wonder, where might that lead?