

Jesus Was Homeless

When you have four children, it is quite rare that they take it in turn to speak. Rarer still when they compress their main characteristics in a simple sentence. And rarest of all, when this all happens in the course of a single conversation. But it happened this week, as I was driving the children home from school on Thursday.

Alice, who is three years old, and pink says, “Daddy, I like cute things.”

Lewis, the six year old gentle giant, sucks his thumb and says “I don’t like it when cute things die.”

Willem, nine years old, pious and just, declares, “everything dies – everything except God.”

Finally, Stefan, who entered our world from a parallel universe, asks, “Has God got a forcefield?”

For those who have never seen star wars, star trek, Blakes 7 or Doctor Who, a force field is an energy cloak wrapped around a space ship to protect it from being damaged by laser attacks or stray asteroids.

And the question of whether God has a force-field is the one that concerns us this evening. Is God invulnerable, immune, undamagable, unable to be hurt? ‘After all, as far as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways’. There is something about a Holy God that keeps him distant from us, unreachable. No tower of Babel can reach up to the heavens.

But this picture of God is not the only picture we see in Scripture. The Old Testament reading speaks of a suffering servant. Traditionally, and with good reason, these words have been understood as a picture of God himself – God’s own vulnerability. It is hard to read these words without picturing the events leading up to and including the crucifixion of Jesus. There is a vulnerability in the heart of God himself that is seen throughout both the Old and the New Testament.

But these words from Isaiah, refer in the first instance to Israel. Israel is God’s servant in the world. It is Israel that suffers, Israel that encounters shame and disgrace, but precisely through that shame and disgrace that the God of Israel is glorified. These words come to apply so aptly to Jesus himself, because in fulfilling his ministry he actually becomes all that Israel was called to be. Jesus is Israel, the faithful remnant, the true servant.

When you look at this Jesus as the Gospels portray him, he is certainly one acquainted with grief. We see him in stark vulnerability, and perhaps it is precisely there that we see God himself most clearly.

Everybody knew that God’s residence was the temple, Mount Zion, in the Holy City, stood the Holy Temple, at the centre of which was the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies. God has his place in the sun. And yet – Jesus wanders homeless around Jerusalem, and declares, ‘foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.’ The stark reality is that Jesus...was...homeless. One of the New Testament faces of God is that of a homeless man, beyond the age of average life-expectancy, with nowhere to lay his head.

Homeless Ministry at Bloomsbury

Many of you will know that Xchange are currently engaged in activity on behalf of homeless people living in the city. One of our friends, Michael Blight, sleeps rough at Fleet Street, invited us to his abode on Wednesday night, to experience his plight first hand. As part of listening to Michael, we invited him to do some of the teaching at Xchange. BY apparent coincidence, he carried us through precisely the prophetic claims that we were supposed to address according to the 'Micah Challenge' course we are following at present. And in his claims about homelessness and church action, he quoted the Gospel passage we read this evening, in a way that it had never occurred to me:

Michael has been living on the streets of London for the last seven years or so. And during his time here, he has communicated at length with various agencies and organisations, including churches and Christian charities. And it may not be a very nice thing to hear – but let's hear it anyway: He said that most churches will make all the right noise about homelessness. They will look at the loose change they have thrown at homeless people in the past, consider the minimal efforts they make in the present, affirm their good intentions and congratulate themselves. Well, for those of you who know Michael, you know that such conversations are unlikely to end there!

So he asks them to do something now. And as he described the churches' response to the invitations he offers, to share with homeless people and support them, he says – that they reply to him with these words: first let me go and bury my father, ... let me say goodbye to the folk at home ... In other words, we can always find a reason for declining the invitation. And they look like admirable and worthy reasons.

But – burying my father did not simply mean that I'm in the middle of funeral arrangements. It meant, I'd rather wait until my father is dead and buried, then I'll come and follow you. And the more we do this, the more we substitute the emotion for the action. We are convinced that we care, that we are politically active because we used to be, and then one day we find ourselves like Sampson, who did not know that the Lord had left.

Well, on this occasion, as you know, we accepted Michael's invitation, and slept rough. Xchange, and therefore Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, were represented by 9 people out on Fleet Street last Wednesday evening. The reason that Michael had invited us at this time, is that a concerted effort is being made by the Corporation of London to clean the streets of London. But this is not so much physical cleaning, as social cleansing. There are to be no homeless people at all on the streets of London by the year 2012. No prizes for guessing why!

Now, homeless people in dire need have been given help by the agencies concerned. Those on the streets who are dangerous are being arrested by the Police and the streets become safer. But there are some living on the streets who don't fall tidily into any category of destitution or crime. So there is no legal way of removing them from the streets. This presents something of a problem if your goal is to reduce the homeless number to zero. So what do you do with these groups of people who are not criminals, or beggars, or in great need – but who have chosen to live on the street? You have to make the conditions unbearable for them. And how do you do that? You clean the streets – between 2 and 3 am, you wake these people up, tell them that the place where they were sleeping is dirty, spray it with water – making it

impossible for them to go back to sleep, and then you move on. You then repeat this process every night, sometimes more than once each night. That way, these people relocate – your targets are met, and everybody's happy. Well, nearly everybody!

There are plenty of people, like Michael, whose voices are not being heard. This action is inflicted upon them because, as one agency director told me, they might not like it, but it's for their own good! So we went to join Michael, and sure enough, the cleansing took place at 2.15 am. And sure enough the police were very polite, even perhaps supportive. And sure enough, they only cleaned the area of Fleet Street where we happened to be lying. And believe it or not, a riot van was present, in case members of a Baptist church youth group attempted to seize control of the state!

Action:

We saw this simply as an act of radical listening. And it may be regarded as tokenistic. So the challenge that lies before us is to continue to honour the commitment that we have made. Not simply that we in Xchange have made. Our church's commitment to homeless people in London precedes us by decades – Faith might even say, by centuries. But the question is how we express that commitment today!

There are several courses of action available to us: it is probably not the last time that many of us will sleep rough on Fleet Street. Some of us may choose to be arrested, by refusing to move when the cleaners come. Some will conduct research to expose the mechanics of the homeless industry, to try to verify claims we have heard that sixty thousand pounds each year is spent on each homeless person. Some may try to uncover the amount that charities receive from the Corporation of London – enabling us to see how dependent their policies become on the corporation. We will want to work with councillors, MPs and local churches. And we may well share the goal of clearing the streets of homeless people. But this will never be achieved until the voices of those homeless people are taken seriously.

Jesus was homeless, and listening to him might not be a bad place to start. Listening to people like Michael enables us to hear more fully some of the claims and invitations that Jesus himself issued to us. Because it is when we put ourselves in this position, we make ourselves vulnerable, and we discover that God himself – in answer to Stefan's question, does not have a forcefield.

The People of God

The Tony Campolo Story.