



ST CHRISTOPHER'S 'SUSPENDED CHURCH' NEWSLETTER

Sunday 22nd November 2020



NEWS UPDATE

Margaret Clarkson



It is with sadness that I am announcing the passing of Margaret Clarkson, who died this week at the age of 90. Margaret has been heavily involved with St Christopher's for a long time, including

being churchwarden for many years. She liked to have fun, and was always a part of everything going. She is pictured here in one of the church pantomimes.

Margaret was a warm and friendly lady. She had a strong character, and a straight-talking side to her that was characteristic of her Yorkshire roots.

The family have advised me that due to the current restrictions they intend to hold a small family funeral at the crematorium. It may be possible for us to recognise Margaret's passing with a thanksgiving service at St Christopher's sometime next year, when more people are able to gather.



Salvation Army Christmas Appeal

In recent years we have supported the Salvation Army Toy Appeal. This year it is more difficult to do so, for obvious reasons; but not impossible. The Salvation Army have advised that due to circumstances their process requires a bit more time this year, and they would like all donations by the end of November. When pressed, I was told they could push it to Friday 4th December.

If you would like to donate NEW toys for children of any age, you could bring them down on Thursday or Sunday mornings when the church is open for prayer, or get in touch with me and we can arrange to collect a donation from your home. They are apparently particularly in need of baby toys, aged 0-3.

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

This week I have put together quite a personal response to Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

Bible Reading – Matthew 25:31-end – The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

Peter

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

No explanation Needed

Sometimes Jesus' teaching needs a bit of explanation in order to interpret its meaning; but this is not one of those times. There is no escaping the message of this parable. Have we fed the hungry, given a drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison – Yes, or No? The answer to this question will apparently have eternal consequences.

So I don't feel the need to debate Jesus' message when it is plain and simple. Instead, I am going to share some experiences with you of how I have found trying to put this into practice in my own life.

Engaging with Reality

As a child when I was taught about caring for the poor, maybe in school or at church, it was presented in a kind of romantic way. The person in need holds out their hands longingly, looking up with puppy-dog eyes, and then gratefully receives a loaf of bread from the kind stranger. Disney films, and depictions of Charles Dickens novels, reinforce this unrealistic image in our minds.



I know now that it is not at all like this. Helping those in need is in reality a tricky business, because material poverty is related to so many other issues including mental health problems, family breakdown, drug addictions, unemployment, and a loss of self-worth. People have mental, emotional, and spiritual needs, as well as physical needs.



The first time I realised the complexity of caring for the poorest in society was when I volunteered to help with the soup run in Lancaster in my early twenties. I was shocked that the rough sleepers who attended used to complain about the selection of sandwiches, asking why there was no cheese on offer when we had supplied them with ham and tuna? I

remember thinking how ungrateful they were, that we had given our time and effort to help them and they responded with criticism; but I do not see things in this way now. These people never had a choice about anything. They had come to feel degraded, because everything they ever received was a handout. Wanting to choose a flavour of sandwich for themselves was really just a desperate cry to receive back some kind of power, having been totally disempowered through all their life experiences, which had landed them at the bottom of the heap.

At the time I was working in a sandwich bar on minimum wage, and it bothered me that so many of the sandwich fillings were getting thrown away when they reached their use by date, so I arranged for some of the fillings to find their way to the soup run before they had to be binned. This felt like a positive thing to do; but it didn't last very long, because it proved to be more hassle than it was worth getting the sandwich fillings to the person in charge of the soup run that evening. It was easier for the organiser to go shopping themselves than it was to add this additional task to the weekly routine.

In this lies another lesson, that it is all too easy for well-meaning people to do things that they think will help, without understanding the best way to go about it. I have learned the importance of listening to professional people who have the experience and knowledge to understand the right way to help those in need, rather than doing what *we* think will help. An obvious example is not to give money to a drug addict, because they are unlikely to spend it on food. We have a policy at Emmanuel and St Christopher's that we do not give out cash to those who come to us, however convincing their story may be. We will go shopping with that person and pay for their groceries at the till. We will put money onto a person's gas or electric key, we will buy clothes for someone, or toys for their child's birthday. If we give out cash we risk feeding a destructive problem rather than feeding their stomach, and this does not help.



Let's not make Excuses

The various challenges and obstacles might make us tempted not to bother; but we must resist these thoughts! We should take to heart Jesus' message, and learn to practise it in ways that are appropriate. If

necessary we can seek advice from people like the Salvation Army staff, or the Foxton Centre. My experience is that these people are only too happy to share their insight and expertise.

Jesus' command to care for the hungry, naked, homeless, sick, or imprisoned, is given without qualification. There are no exceptions to the rule – a drug addict still needs to eat! There are those who say things like, *“the poor are poor because it is their fault,”* and *“this is the result of their own choices,”* and *“they need to take responsibility for themselves.”* This may be true, but you try thinking straight when you haven't eaten anything for a few days. You would probably make some bad choices too! Sometimes it is right, and in a person's interest, to challenge their behaviour, but have we earned the right to do this if we have not first shown that we care by meeting their basic need for food and shelter?

Alan's Story

I met Alan on Wednesday 13th November 2013 whilst I was curate at Christ Church, Fulwood. Alan is not his real name, but this is what I will call him. He knocked on the church hall door that afternoon where I was present, to tell me he was homeless, and he hadn't eaten for a couple of days. We walked to Sainsburys café where he enjoyed a good solid meal, and he began to tell me about his life. Little did I know that over the next year I would be seeing a lot more of Alan.



Alan was in his sixties and originally from Ireland. His accent was a strange combination of Irish tones mixed with a cockney twang, having spent much of his life homeless or 'sofa surfing' in London. He had moved to the UK at the age of eight when he, his mother, and his sister ran away from an abusive father. As a child he had been deeply abused by his dad in every way imaginable. He spoke about it with pain and anger as if it had happened yesterday, despite it being so many years ago.

Alan suffered from significant mental health problems, having been diagnosed with a personality disorder. He was a volatile character, who was easily provoked to anger. He possessed a virulent hatred for anyone who drank alcohol given that his father had been an alcoholic, which is quite a problem for someone who moves among homeless hostels and mixes with other rough sleepers. For this reason he hated engaging with the homeless services wherever he went, because it would bring him into contact with drinkers whom he could not tolerate.

At first I helped Alan find emergency accommodation. A lady at Christ Church payed for him to spend a couple of nights in a bed and breakfast. After a couple of nights at the B & B we were told that there was no longer a room for him, so a couple of evenings later I was driving Alan around Preston trying to find somewhere for him to stay. This proved to be difficult. We ended up at a little place on Fishergate Hill, but Alan refused to go in because it stank of smoke and booze, and he knew there would be drinkers inside. He became agitated and refused to go in, yet sadly there was no other option available,

so at 10.00pm on that cold November night he walked away from my car and slept on the street, the memory of which still haunts me.



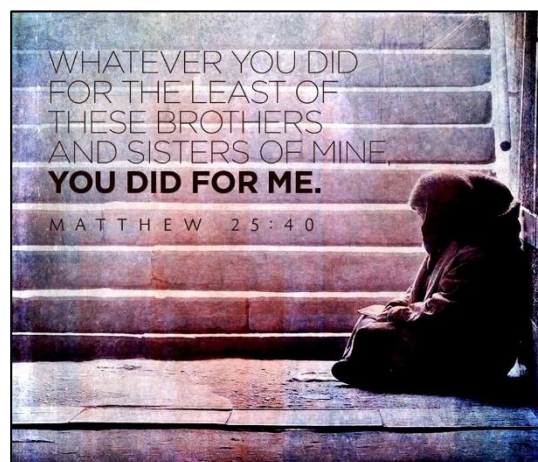
I got involved with trying to resolve Alan's housing problems, writing letters and accompanying him to the Town Hall, and assisting with his housing benefit application. We got him a room at the Old Steam Mill on Fylde Road for a few weeks, but he hated it there (it is pretty grim), and after over-dosing on paracetamol (not for the first time in his life) he spent some time in hospital.

This pattern of mental breakdown and constant changes of accommodation happened more than once over the months that followed, and I came to realise that this was Alan's normal way of life. He knew no different. I would buy him shopping when he had run out of money, or pay for an emergency night in a bed and breakfast. I remember the time in June 2014 when I received a call from Social Services to say that Alan had to leave the flat he was in and be rehoused at a hostel in Blackburn. He had given my number because he knew of no-one else to call on, so I drove him to Blackburn along with his little bag of clothes, which was all that he possessed.

Alan's problems were such that he could not sustain relationships with others for any length of time, things would always break down due to his instability and paranoia. This was the root of all the other problems, and to make matters worse he refused to engage with the mental health services, despite my best efforts to encourage him. Eventually Alan got on the train to Hull in August 2014, where he would inevitably go and repeat all the same patterns of behaviour.

Without a doubt I was out of my depth with Alan! There are some things I would approach differently if I could go back and do it again, including showing more regard for my own personal safety. I could not fix all of his problems, though I often prayed that God would do so; and yet I maintain that such a person should still be shown compassion. They should still receive food, shelter, clothing, and care from those who are followers of Jesus, despite the fact that they are likely to need it again before long! We might wish to say that our state services should meet all of these needs, but a person like Alan is so erratic that the state system cannot keep up with him, and if a local authority considers that someone has chosen to make themselves homeless they will not provide accommodation.

When all is said and done, I loved Alan. He had a wonderful humour, though a poor choice of football team! (Arsenal). He had a sensitive heart, and would give his last pound to someone even if it was all he had. As I reflect on my experience with Alan, what I realise is that I set out to change his circumstances, but he ended up changing me. Jesus says that *whatever we do for the least of those who are members of my family, we do for him*, and in this lies a subtle truth that



people often miss. We encounter Jesus in the people whom we care for; and that is what happened with Alan. Strange though it sounds, I met Jesus through him.

Known to God

Those on the breadline are not just objects of our charity, so that we can feel good about ourselves, or absolve our consciences because we feel guilty about our own affluence. They are Frank, Sally, Steve, Kevin, Janet, Tracy, James, and Alan... So when Jesus tells us to care for the poor, let's start by recognising that this is not just something he asks us to do *in general*, it is a command to care for specific individuals whom God knows and loves. We diminish Jesus' message when we talk about 'the poor' like they are some kind of perceived 'other.' Let us instead regard them as our neighbours, and fellow members of God's family, because that is who they are.

Prayers

Lord Jesus, we thank you for every act of kindness and love that is given in your name.

May we never forget the call to care for those in need, nor make excuses for not doing so.

Help us understand how we can show your love practically, and how we can support those who are on the frontline of caring for the hungry, the weak, the broken, and the sick.

Lord in your mercy;

Hear our prayer.

We thank you Lord for those in our city who have a special vocation to care for the poor and marginalised.

We pray that you will bless the work of the Foxton Centre, the Salvation Army, and other charitable organisations that are meeting human needs. We pray that you will resource these organisations with the people and finances to continue their good work, and we pray that there will be good partnerships between state sector and voluntary services.

Lord in your mercy;

Hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, guide us as a church into ministries that will fulfill the call of Christ to love all people, and to show special concern for those who are impoverished. May we grow in our confidence as a compassionate community, understanding our role alongside other providers.

Let us first of all recognise and respond to the needs that exist on our doorstep.

Give us eyes to see these needs, and the courage to act upon them.

Lord in your mercy;

Hear our prayer.

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress.

Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low;

that we may rejoice in your comfort

knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.