

The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2010

Christmas: A story of homelessness and exile

By
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Manna Centre Director



The story of Christmas is a story of homelessness. The Son of God when He's born is not born in opulence, but in poverty. His mother, Mary, does not plan to have Him. Joseph, her fiancé, learns that she is pregnant unexpectedly. He has to restrain himself not to break off the engagement publically. It is a true testament to his character that he did not go public with the news as Mary would have most probably been stoned, as was the custom, for being considered immoral. Joseph is reassured by an angel of God that Mary is expecting the Son of God. Even after his birth, the Holy Family have to go into exile to avoid being killed. Jesus, the Son of God, lived a very human life with all its trials, twists, hurts and joys. When He chooses to come into the world, as the Son of Man, it is as a Homeless Person and a Refugee. His triumph over adversities has given people down the ages the hope that they too can. This is the Hope we celebrate at Christmas.

Successive government policies in the past twenty years, both Conservative and Labour, have contributed in reducing the number of people sleeping rough. Working closely with voluntary organisations, the various services set up to help homeless people have greatly succeeded in keeping the number of people sleeping rough in the hundreds as opposed to the thousands. There has been a concerted effort to pull resources together and work collaboratively to achieve this reduction. The establishment of several outreach teams, for instance, have ensured that access to supported housing has been reserved for people who have actually slept rough and who have high support needs. Once in accommodation, cases have been followed up by resettlement workers to maintain tenancies.

However, the various cuts in public services and the reform of the welfare system being introduced risk jeopardising the progress that has been made. Locally, for instance, the mental health team that work closely with our centre would be reduced from a team of 12 people to 6. Where previously

they were expected to deal with an average of 200 clients per year, with their new level of staffing they could only cope with 120 people a year. Furthermore, where we could have been sure of obtaining accommodation for a homeless person on the basis that we could apply for housing benefits, this guarantee may no longer be there in the case of a person considered as 'refusing to work'.

In the worst case scenario people who sleep rough and who do not appear to have severe mental or physical health problems may end up not being eligible for benefits. Such people may be looked at as unwilling to work and therefore not deserving of assistance. Whilst I understand the argument that everyone who can work should work, it is important to equally bear in mind that human problems are not always as straight forward as we would like them to be. After a relationship breakdown, bereavement, a life of abuse or addiction, people who lose their mental energy in this way, may be treated very harshly when actually a different approach could have been more effective.

Very recently, I was speaking with a former Manna service-user who was describing to me how it felt during his bout of depression. There were times when he wondered about the point of carrying on. However much he tried, he could not keep himself going. It was painful the hurt he felt inside. Looking in from the outside we could have been tempted to call him lazy but when he tells you his story then things start to make sense. As he could still function relatively well on the surface, he was not deemed, under the old system, as ill enough to be on incapacity benefits, so he was expected to work. He was allowed some leeway, it meant that he could work out a plan out of benefits, which he is now able to do. He is working part-time as a support worker. How would the new system cope with such complex cases?

It is not Christmas if we do not talk of homelessness. It is not Christmas if we do not remember those fleeing persecution. It is not Christmas if all we do is sing carols and drink mulled wine. How will we, as Christians and People of Goodwill, respond to these new challenges?

The Heart of Christmas

By

Margaret Shapland

Welfare & Advice Worker



“Christmas happens everywhere every time someone reaches out to touch another life with love” Carol Duerksen

Some months back, I came across an article in The Guardian written by Clive Stafford-Smith, a lawyer who has been responsible for many death row cases in the USA. He wrote about a replica of the Texas death row cell re-created by the human rights charity Reprieve, which was being exhibited at St Martin in the Fields in central London. It has been put there to allow people to experience just for an hour or so what it might feel like to languish in such a cell. However, one night during the exhibition, someone chose to crack the lock on the door – a homeless person used the facilities and spent the night there.

“There are no strangers on Christmas Eve”
Adele Comandini, Edward Sutherland and Michael O’Brien – Beyond Tomorrow (after proposing that the partners invite three strangers to dinner)

He points out that more than a quarter of a million people find themselves homeless each year but many may find shelter in the home of friends or their family while they re-establish themselves. However, 3,600 people slept on the streets of London alone last year, a number which has increased by a thousand since 2006.

With winter looming, the prospects of trying to sleep in a doorway can be a nightmarish prospect and if the weather is anything like last winter which was the coldest in 30 years, then even more so. We are already being told that there are signs that the weather will be cold this coming winter season – the early arrival of Bewick swans from Siberia is said to herald a particularly cold winter; that there are large numbers of holly berries which signal cold months ahead – all based on folklore of course. Nevertheless as with all folklore, there is usually more than an element of truth to it.

If that is the case, we can only be glad that at the centre we can offer a warm and a safe place to be

and – hopefully – a place where people can get the chance for a fresh start in their lives.

“The star of Bethlehem was a star of hope that led wise men to the fulfilment of their expectations, the success of their expedition. Nothing in this world is more fundamental for success in life than hope, and this star pointed to our only source for true hope; Jesus Christ” D James Kennedy (“Following the Star” – Christmas Stories for the Heart)

In the advice service, the number of clients we have seen in the three months from July to September was up 30% on the same period in 2009 and only marginally less than traditionally high numbers we see during the winter quarter from January to March. And many of them who come to us need our help with housing as well as benefits, debt etc

More and more we see people driven to come to London as they feel that they have better prospects in London and the South-east. They cannot find jobs where they were living before. They come without having the savings to make provision for accommodation to tide them over until they find work and many need additional skills particularly when the job market is so competitive to help give them any advantage when finding work. Many are people who have fled persecution in their own countries and whose asylum claims are being at least dealt with promptly by the Border Agency, they are left not being integrated or having the necessary language or work skills to find sustainable work.

It is part of our job to lay the foundation for those who come to us seeking help with establishing themselves and part of that foundation must be help in finding suitable accommodation in the capital, not easy when the average cost of a rental flat in London is approaching £1,000, even a house share can cost £400 a month and a studio flat from £550 -£650 per month.

“To celebrate the heart of Christmas is to forget ourselves in the service of others”

Henry C Link

Let me talk about how we helped one young man. He had quite a successful career in sales and retail whilst living in Bristol but with retail sales suffering he found himself made redundant

and unable to get another job quickly enough to avoid having to give up his accommodation. He came to London to get a better chance. We met with him and were able to find an all-year round night shelter to take him while he got his Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claim up and running. Most hostels and landlords require JSA as proof of eligibility for housing benefit. We also found him a place in an employment project which could provide facilities for job searches, re-writing his CV, use of the internet – all the requirements needed today to seek jobs effectively.

His Jobseekers Allowance came through – we had found a landlord who was willing to take him but on the day, he was due to sign the housing benefit forms, he found a job back in sales. Unfortunately, as he would now be paying rent, the landlord wanted a guarantor who would guarantee that the rent would be paid, not only a month's rent in advance which we had organised through the Department of Work & Pensions but also a month's deposit. All in all, this was beyond what was possible and reluctantly, he had to give up the room.

To tide him over until he could save for a deposit, we applied for a fund which would cover his housing costs in a backpacker hostel until he had accrued enough salary to pay the up front costs of any accommodation. We met with him recently. He is working mostly nights in sales but making good money and has been able to afford a house share in an attractive house in a reasonable area.

That's the kind of story that we would like to emulate with many of our other clients if that is a route they want to pursue. It is also a situation that we can expect to hear more of in the centre as the actions resulting from the Government Spending review start to bite.

I consider myself lucky that we can help in such a way. I hope that we can continue to do so with your help to give those who use the centre the hope and the help they need.

May I wish you a joyful and peaceful Christmas and my hope that 2011 sees you enjoy happiness and good health with just a little reminder of what Christmas is truly about:

“Christmas will always be in the heart of God's children everywhere as they extend a helping hand to a friend in need... as they go about reflecting God's goodness in the little quiet and unheralded expressions of a loving heart... as they share the light of the world with those who live in darkness” Jane Hillsmen (“Christmas”)

Many thanks & a happy retirement



Rose Ablett has been the longest serving volunteer in the history of the Manna Centre. Rose started volunteering with us 2 years after we first opened in 1984. She came in 5 days a week to help with the washing up.

For the last 18 years Rose has been the driving force behind our clothing store, sorting and distributing our clothing donations 2 days a week & one Sunday a month.

At the very young age of 86 Rose has decided it is time to retire. We are truly grateful to Rose for her commitment to our work over the years. We wish her a very happy retirement & God's blessing in all that she does.



Focus on Eritrean Refugees

By

Karolina Muszynska

Welfare & Advice Worker



Living in safety is something that most of us in Western Europe take for granted. But it is not the case for refugees, people who have no choice but to flee their homeland in order to protect their own personal safety.

In this article I would like to focus on Eritrean refugees in the UK as I am meeting a lot of them in my work here at the Manna Centre and their stories have really touched my heart. Let me introduce you to two of them:

L is a lady in her fifties, she has just been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK. She was placed somewhere outside of London but she decided to move to London to be closer to her Eritrean community. She has very unhappy eyes and is in constant pain as she had been tortured in her home country. She had to leave her family, friends, culture and her sense of belonging in order to escape persecution because of her religious beliefs. She speaks very little English and it is clear to see how much she is struggling to build a new life here in the UK.

Z is a 21 years old man who witnessed his mother being shot dead by the Eritrean police. Her crime was to practice a religion outside of the 4 prescribed as acceptable to the government (see below). The picture of his mother being murdered will probably stay in Z's head forever. He came to the UK a year ago. Again he has very sad eyes and has been diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. He has no relatives or friends in the UK and was unable to give me a 'next of kin' when we were completing a hostel referral form.

Before I met them I had a very little idea about Eritrea. All I knew was that it is a small country, located somewhere in North East Africa. In this article I would like to share with you some of my findings about Eritrea. I have two very important reasons why I would like to share it with you. Firstly I believe that the deeper our awareness of the suffering of another is, the more compassionate we become. In my opinion compassion improves the quality of everyone's life and makes the world a better place. As the Dalai Lama has said, "*If you want others to be*

happy - practice compassion. If you want to be happy - practice compassion."

Secondly there are a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings about refugees in the UK. The most common one is that asylum seekers come here to take an advantage of the welfare system. The research carried out by the Refugee Council refutes this argument. "Over two-thirds did not specifically choose to come to the UK to claim asylum. Most only discovered they were going to the UK after leaving their home country or even upon arrival....Three-quarters had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK and most had no expectation that they would receive support..." (<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>).

Here are some of my findings about Eritrea. Eritrea is a small, mountainous country, bordered by Sudan in the west, Ethiopia in the south, and Djibouti in the south-east. The capital is Asmara. In the last 400 years this small country has been ruled by a variety of outsiders from the Ottoman Turks to the Egyptians, the Italians, the British, and lastly the Ethiopians. Finally, in 1993 Eritrea declared its independence from Ethiopia and since then has been ruled by President Isaias Afewerki, who is now seen as a one of the worst dictators in Africa.

Eritrea is a single party state run by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice. Other political groups are not allowed to organise. Eritrea is the only African country to have no privately-owned news media. The government closed the private press in 2001 for "endangering national security"

"In its 2009 Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders classified the media environment in Eritrea at 175 out of 175, the lowest possible rating, and below that of totalitarian North Korea at 174. The public media in Eritrea does nothing but relay the repressive regime's ultra-nationalist ideology and government propaganda; freedom of speech and of the press is virtually non-existent. Not a single foreign correspondent now lives in Asmara." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eritrea>).

Meetings of more than seven people require permission in Eritrea and internet use is monitored. Citizens, tourists and diplomats

require permission to travel from one town to another.

There is no freedom of faith in Eritrea. In 2002 the government decreed that only Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Lutheranism and Sunni Islam were acceptable religions. All other faiths and denominations have not been allowed to worship freely and have faced severe repression including imprisonment and torture. In its 2006 religious freedom report, the U.S. State Department named Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern"(CPC) for the third year in a row.

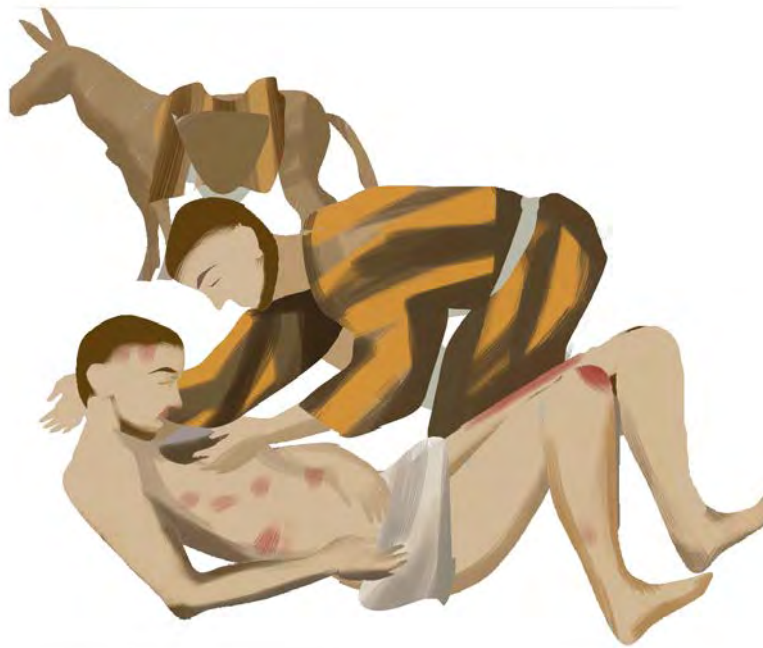
On 20th June 2009 Khataza Gondwe from Christian Solidarity Worldwide wrote in her article for the Guardian: *"I have interviewed former prisoners of all faiths and none. They describe a myriad of inhumane punishments, including beatings, rape, people blinded by the sun after months/years imprisoned underground, prisoners bound for so long in contorted positions that limbs atrophy and are amputated, imprisonment in shipping containers, extra-judicial executions, and inadequate food, water and medical treatment....Small wonder that thousands flee, despite a shoot-to-kill policy for escapees.*

Some pick their way through the mined and patrolled border with Ethiopia. Others cross the Sahara on foot to Sudan, but have found little hope of sanctuary since the country's rapprochement with Eritrea. Putting their lives in the hands of people smugglers, they try to escape to Libya, where they face severe mistreatment, racial discrimination and harsh detention. Some subsequently cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels hoping for refuge in Europe, where asylum is far from assured. Others enter Egypt, risking fines for illegal entry, harsh

imprisonment and, worse still, forcible return to Eritrea.

Those who cross into Israel run into the harsh reality of the modern state, where an anti-infiltration law may soon criminalise asylum seeking, and where they are either imprisoned or forced to live in slums. The search for refuge has resulted in the deaths of an unknown number of Eritreans in the Sahara, the Mediterranean or through suicide in foreign cities..."

My experience with working with refugees is that the British asylum system is a tough one. Refugees are certainly not given preferential treatment. I do however feel proud that I live in a country that offers some sort of assistance to refugees. What about you?



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Souls of the Dark Night & the Christmas Wish

By

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“Spiritual persons suffer great trials from the fear of being lost on the road and that God has abandoned them...” (St John of Cross).

“As God sets the soul in this dark night... He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever.” (St John of Cross)

“Desolation is a file, and the endurance of darkness is preparation for great light.” (St John of Cross)

We here at Manna meet souls getting through ‘the dark night of the soul’. Many of them will never try to reach the light as they are unaware what they are going through and what the cause of their suffering may be.

Wilfried Stinissen’s book ‘Night is my light’ (Interpretation of the book ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ by St John of Cross) inspired me to write this article. I was not ready one year or even a few months ago but now the idea cannot wait any longer. It is because I have met enough homeless clients who suffer so much, who are lost and who seem to be ready to improve their lives, but do not know how to begin.

Shoplifting helped W to survive since he was five years old. While his parents were not sober enough to feed him and his younger brother, he used to take his brother to the shop and steal. He was very proud of himself when his brother smiled and his mouth was full of chocolate. The place where W grew up in is renowned for its bad reputation. Despite being a sensitive and intelligent young man he was influenced by older criminals within his neighbourhood. He eventually ended up in prison when he was 23. On being released from prison he was placed on probation.

W did not have enough patience to meet his probation officer on a regular basis and decided to flee to London. When he first came to the Manna in 2008 he already had a number of

minor criminal offences committed in the UK. He had become homeless and could be arrested at any moment because of his outstanding unpaid fines. In addition to this W was addicted to alcohol. He was definitely fed up with his life but could not see any possible way to improve it. It took quite a long time to clear these outstanding matters up but on doing so he decided he wanted to change his life.

During our advice sessions we talked about God (although born a Catholic W no longer sees himself as one but does believe in a spiritual life) and I had mentioned St John’s of the Cross view of the human soul. W decided to take responsibility for his life and returned to Poland to serve his sentence. He was released after a few months and is now attending an AA group to help him heal his body and soul. W’s family supported him financially so he could get through this transitional period. Unfortunately

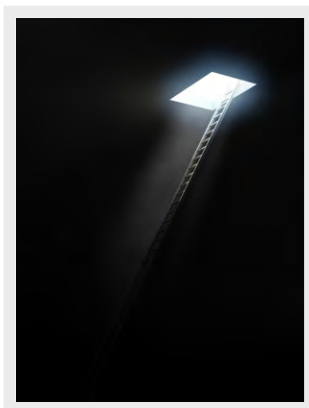
most of our homeless clients do not have access to such financial support to help them should they decide to change their lives.

G sleeps rough in the West London area. In spite of being an alcoholic for more than 15 years he is still able to judge his situation and talk about his problems openly and clearly. He does not have any family in Poland and is not interested in returning there. He

has worked in the UK in the past but is not entitled to any benefits.

From our first meeting G was very honest and open about his circumstances. He lives in a squat; with no electricity, no gas, no water, and a concrete floor for his bed. He admitted quite honestly that when he and his ‘flat mates’ wake up in the morning they start drinking cider, lots of cider... He is aware of how far down the social scale he has fallen. He would like to change his circumstances but feels he would not be able to obtain or maintain any job. Due to his health problems (including epilepsy) and his state of mind at present he is probably right.

During our first advice session he asked if I knew of any projects in the UK offering accommodation and support to people such as himself i.e. non English speaker with no access to benefits, in poor physical & mental health and with a serious alcohol addiction. I simply did not



know what to say. Eventually I told him I would like to see such a project and promised him a space in it if it ever comes true. G promised to play the lottery and give up a part of his winnings to such a project...

This would be my and some of our homeless clients' Christmas dream - to establish a project which enables them to get off the streets and improve their lives. I envisage a house full of warmth, kindness and professional support run according to the rules of 'modern asceticism' as described by Wilfried Stinissen in the book mentioned above. Those rules are:

1. Respect for all divine creations including oneself

It is very important to look after the body and treat it with respect (to feed it properly, not to forget about physical exercises and rest). No one must forget about respect for nature and protecting the environment.

2. Body and soul is a unity.

People must realise that the body is only a part of a human being. Only when we are in harmony with the soul will human beings find happiness. Anyone attached to things, habits, addictions will not be able to grow spiritually and be truly happy.

3. Live your life with an open spirit.

Take reality as it is; do not try to force it. Do not judge other people. Go and meet reality without expectations or prejudice.

Anyone who is willing to work hard towards a new life could join such a project, no matter their religion or beliefs, no matter their entitlement or lack of entitlement to benefits. It would be open to everyone 'lost in the world' and seeking a chance and spiritual support.



Many of the homeless clients I see are unable or unwilling to look for or to find employment. Their life chances would improve if they were offered a place where they could heal and free their bodies, minds and souls. If they became spiritually stronger they would be better placed to face the hard reality and competition of the job market.

Maybe the idea seems to be unreal but great projects usually start from a dream. I believe it is always worth sharing dreams with others as it gives the dream the possibility of becoming true. Any person who gets out of the darkness and into the light makes the whole world better.



Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2010

It costs **£32,300 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate Christian response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.



Would you like to support the work of the Manna Centre by making a one-off donation

or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form? If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 28% to your donation, at no extra expense to yourself, you can do so by simply Gift-Aiding your donation.

Perhaps you would consider leaving us a **legacy** in your will?

However you choose to support our work we are indeed most grateful.

May God bless you in this holy season & throughout the coming year.

I would like to donate £_____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society")

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here and sign below.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Standing Order Form

Name and Address of your Bank/Building Society;

To the Manager of _____ Bank/Building Society

Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society Manager:

Please pay into the account of the Manna Society – Co-operative Bank plc account No. 50109537, Sort Code 08-92-99,

The sum of £ _____ (amount in words: _____)

Commencing on (date) _____

And also the same amount in every succeeding MONTH / 3 MONTHS / YEAR (circle one as appropriate)

On _____ (date of month)

Until further notice, charging the same to my account:

Name _____ (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature _____

Address _____

Post Code _____

Bank/Building Society Details:

Account Name:.....

Account Number:.....Sort Code:.....

*** Please return completed form to The Manna Society, 6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP ***