



The spirit & challenge of Christmas

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



The ... challenge of Christmas is this: justice is what happens when all receive a fair share of God's world and only such distributive justice can establish peace on earth. - John Dominic Crossan ("The Challenge of Christmas", 12/12/2011)

Just this week, I was approached by one of my colleagues – she wanted to speak to me about how we should assist one of our clients. We had worked hard between the three of us advice workers to find this person a housing offer and they were accepted onto the waiting list for a room; a good choice for this client as this project is particularly good at working with clients who may be in and out of work, which this client was as his main work was that of cleaning or kitchen portering - but after the client waiting some weeks for the offer to come through - we faced a dilemma.

There is a relatively small up-front cost of £70 that everyone housed there has to pay, which the client was aware of and had agreed with the housing provider to get together whilst he was waiting for the space to become available. It covers four week's service charge and the cost of providing the special key fob that is refundable. This client had approached my colleague this week as he did not have the money saved to pay for this charge. My colleague and I discussed this and we agreed that we would do what we had done with other clients – agree to obtain 50% from a small fund we hold that we try and eke out to help as many people as we can and to ask the client if he could get together the other 50%. He felt that he had time to do this as the room was being redecorated and new flooring put down.

Before the scheduled date, the room was finished and the client was told that he could book in immediately. He did not have the funds for his 50%. He came to see us again – what to do – stick to our guns and possibly lose the accommodation - or decide to help him with the full amount. – and perhaps in the future, when our small fund might be depleted have to say “no” to someone else equally deserving of a roof over their head or have to apply to an external fund where a decision might be delayed with consequences for that

client. The client was very apologetic, everyone he knew was in the same boat as himself. The housing provider told me that there were seven other people on the waiting list for that room, so if the client was unable to provide that payment, it would have to be offered to someone else. Of course, we agreed to make the full up-front payment. The client was so grateful that he wanted to leave his bank card with us as a gesture of good faith that when his next benefit payment came through, he would stick to the original agreement and pay us back; in actuality, we will make an application to an external grant organisation who may well give us the small grant that will cover all the cost involved retrospectively.

If you look at it comparatively, the cost of putting that roof over that client's head was only slightly more than the cost of one of the most popular toy choices for this Christmas, the Furby Crystal priced at £64.99 – so it seems almost ludicrous to go through all this soul-searching – there really is no contest..

It made me think about three things that impact so negatively on our clients:

a) Four of the five jobs created have been in sectors where average wages are less than a quarter of average earnings – admittedly just under 80% of those jobs are in London but most are involuntary part-time, zero hours or enforced self-employment and this uncertainty of income makes many landlords reluctant to accept them as tenants, harder for people to budget, harder to meet living costs consistently.

b) the trend in the private rented sector among landlords is to turn their backs on housing benefit clients. The National Landlord's Association have reported that the proportion of landlords prepared to accept clients claiming housing benefit had more than halved in 3 years from 46% to 22%. I am sure that many of you have read about one large landlord who served notice on all the 200 tenants in their portfolio who were recipients of housing benefit. Landlords might see how this impacts on people but they run a business as this quote illustrates “*I don't have spare pots of money to subsidise a tenant just because they couldn't work enough hours. These zero-hours contracts are a disgrace and should be banned immediately.*” What it means for us is that each housing opportunity we

get is precious and we cannot afford to lose it for a client.

c) over the past four years, we have seen the longest decline in living standards since the 1870s or the Depression depending on what paper you read. This has hit everyone but with benefits being slashed and the real value of Jobseekers Allowance according to research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation being i) one-fifth of the actual average expenditure of single adults in the population as a whole ii) half of the income required to meet the poverty line that the Government itself has set as its definition of being in poverty – you can see the difficulty that people in receipt of this benefit face. Many years ago, I was a recipient of Jobseeker's Allowance and at that time, it seemed just about manageable if one was very, very careful but even so I remember that there were choices to be made. If I had to travel to get to an appointment (it was before the days of the Oyster card) I made choices about whether if I had time I could walk it – to get to the voluntary work I was doing at that time, I would do the 75 minute walk as it could save me that little bit of money and I know that many of our clients have to make those kind of decisions on a daily basis, so I have great sympathy with the effort that it takes to save just a small sum.

This leads me on to another measure of poverty – that of “fuel” poverty. Just recently, the Government has chosen to adopt a new definition of what constitutes “fuel” poverty. The old definition was that a household spending more than 10% of income to adequately heat the home – was ditched in England in favour of “low-income high costs” model, where households facing fuel costs above the national median and where the cost of meeting them pushes them below the official poverty line are considered to be in fuel poverty – if you can understand this, I applaud you. This had the effect of cutting the number of households in fuel poverty from 3.2 million to 2.4 million at a stroke.

All I know is that dealing with debt relating to fuel costs is one of the most frequent issues we face. I have just worked with a client who despite trying to limit his consumption had got into debt with his gas supplier. Between us, we had looked at his

meter to ensure that it was not faulty, had his boiler checked to ensure that it was working efficiently. He was attempting to pay it back but the debt was progressively getting larger, it was put into the hands of debt collection agencies with additional costs being added. In the end, we agreed with his gas supplier that he would change to a prepayment meter but the question was how to deal with the remaining debt. This person was definitely in fuel poverty no matter how you might want to classify it. His fuel costs were taking 25% of his weekly income and along with juggling the other commitments he had, he was gradually sinking under the burden. His mental health already fragile was deteriorating further and he could not cope with the phone calls from the organisation charged with collecting the debt, the correspondence etc.

We found a trust that specifically deals with fuel debts and made an application to see if they could help us reduce the amount of debt that the client had outstanding. It took some months but just recently we got the good news that they were willing to help us and because of his mental health issues, they gave us a grant that will clear the debt. For this client, it will be a great relief and it has allowed him a breathing space to look at his weekly budget and make adjustments.

I have known this client a long time and the last time we met, we were reflecting on how far he had come in his life. At the centre, we have seen him go from being a long-term alcoholic to detoxification to rehabilitation to sobriety to doing voluntary work to help those who are still facing the challenges that addiction to alcohol can bring. We don't see him as often now but he knows we are there if and when he needs us. It's a circle – through the support dear reader that you continue to give us so generously, we have the opportunity to help clients such as these, they - in many cases - go on to help others.

Toni Sorenson, the author of *The Shaken Earth* and *Redemption Road* puts it so well

“The spirit of Christmas is found when we lift the load of others.”

To all of you, a peaceful holiday season

An Evening in Westminster Abbey

By

Ellen Burns

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



My colleague Karolina and I recently attended an event organised by the office of the Canon of Westminster, at Westminster Abbey. Staff from agencies working with homeless people in London were invited to visit the Abbey. The event was completely free of charge. We were to arrive any time after 6pm. We were allowed to wander round the Abbey at our leisure until 7pm, at which point we were given a buffet dinner, and listened to a talk by a new homelessness charity, about their work.

It was a lovely opportunity to see Westminster Abbey free of charge, in the evening, when it is closed to the general public. I had not been before, and it was very beautiful and atmospheric. The organist was even practising as Karolina and I walked around. We were extended a very warm welcome, and were made to feel special and appreciated. After our dinner, and at the end of the talk, we were all thanked for the work we do by the Abbey's representative. It was a memorable and special experience.



It got me thinking about the Church's historical role in inspiring and coordinating charitable work in the community, and about what plays this role now, in an increasingly secular and religiously diverse nation. It was validating, motivating and morale-boosting to be brought together as a group, and to be thanked for our work. It also allowed us an evening to focus on the bigger societal, ethical picture into which our organisation fits, and to be inspired by one another's approaches. How, if at all, can such an important uniting experience be facilitated in a largely secular, and religiously diverse, society?

Secular Charity = Capitalist Charity?

As it becomes more secular, our society increasingly operates along capitalist, profit-making lines. Many charities are also being run

more like businesses. They are providing a service, and if they do so most efficiently then they will become the biggest and most successful, generating momentum and productivity. Some people would argue that this, in the end, creates more wealth to be used for charitable purposes. But does that fit with what charity is, and how it should work?

The staff of one homelessness agency that we work closely with have recently gone on strike over this issue. They told me that the 'brand'/results-focused approach has resulted in significant wage cuts for front line workers, (whilst big money is still spent at the top of the organisation). This means that they cannot attract the mature, life-

experienced, often family-supporting workers that they feel are vital on the front line, engaging with complex human beings and trying to help them. They believe the high staff turnover it results in also affects the quality, if not the brand-boosting quantity, of the work they can do.

If brand success/quantitative results are the aim of an organisation (and this potentially means competition with other organisations), then it may also result in practices such as

'gatekeeping' –

"we don't need to help this difficult

client because they are rough sleeping just over the border, in your catchment area". Something seems to me to have gone wrong in this type of thinking. There is also the gut feeling that it is just inappropriate to view a charity in the same way as we view a business. Something seems to be missing.

Charity without Religion

Religion, with its explicit statement of values and morals, provides an alternative and fitting guiding principle for charities, but Christianity is obviously much less universal in the UK than it was when Westminster Abbey was being built. There are small and medium-sized charities of various religious denominations working with homeless people across the UK. But now many homeless

charities, some very large – e.g. Crisis – have no religious affiliations or roots at all. How do they define their ethos, and the ethics behind what they do? Do they need to, in order to avoid falling into the ‘capitalist model’ traps for their organisation? If they *do* need to, will their guiding principles end up being quite diverse, or will they all be very similar, and similar to those of religious organisations, in the end? (Some schools of thought, such as Humanism, seem to suggest that a universal value system, separate from religion, will naturally emerge, and that we can base our secular charitable principles on that).

The Manna Society

What I particularly like about the Manna is that it focusses on basic, simple, individual need. ‘What do you need? What are you missing? Why are you suffering? Let’s see if we can get you that thing, so that you can stop suffering’. A large part of what we do is feed and water people who need food and water, clothe people who need clothes, provide showers and soap for those who need a wash. Even our advice service is very practical and down-to-earth. We simply try to help with whatever problem the client comes to us with. There is no ‘pathway’ that we are trying to get people down. We don’t use catchphrases such as ‘recovery’. The Manna Society is, as our simple leaflet puts it, “A *compassionate and practical response to poverty and homelessness*”. It starts from what the individual person needs, right now.

This seems to me to be a good guiding ethos for a charity trying to help homeless people. It starts from the client’s needs instead of those of the organisation, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of the capitalist model. It also avoids patronising clients, or shoehorning them down a certain path. Each client’s needs are different, and they may be different on different day 1 and day 2 of their life crisis. And although the Manna is a Christian charity, the principle is beautifully simple and therefore resonates across religions and secular social attitudes.

It is still the case that, as society changes and becomes more secular, events like the evening in the Abbey – people coming together to reflect on how to help others, and give thanks for the charitable work done – become more rare. This is sad.

Manna Society, Central Office

6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP.

Tel/Fax: 020-7357 9363.

Website: www.mannasociety.org.uk

E-mail: mail@mannasociety.org.uk

Manna Day Centre,

6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP.

Tel: 020-7403 1931.

E-mail: daycentre@mannasociety.org.uk

Director,

Bandi Mbubi

6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP

Tel: 020-7403 0441

E-mail: bandi@mannasociety.org.uk

Editor: Paddy Boyle



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The light of Christmas in an imperfect world

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



An important lesson of Christmas is that in spite of one's effort to look after oneself and one's loved ones, there are always issues that are beyond one's control. There are things one can do which are clearly in one's control but others which clearly are not. This is also true in the birth of Jesus. Mary is chosen by God but she chooses to accept the will of God "Let it be done unto me according to thy word". The circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus are beyond the control of Mary and Joseph. When she is about to give birth, as a couple, they have to travel all the way to Bethlehem to comply with the census being carried out. There in Bethlehem Jesus is eventually born. For such a responsible couple and praised as such in the Bible, all to have him being born in a manger.

From the perspective of the homeless people we work with both dimensions are clearly at play in their lives, certain decisions are in their control whilst others are not. We can help them clarify which is which. By taking the time to listen to their problems, we begin to understand together what needs to be done and how. Invariably, this involves identifying their needs, working out what their expectations are and the chances of meeting them. We establish too what is realistic as despite our best intentions not everything is in the realm of the possible. At least as a first step. They can thus be clear-headed about what they can do to solve their problems.

A major highlight in the life of the Manna Centre every year is our Christmas dinner. It is a wonderful opportunity for staff and service-users to celebrate Christmas together. It is also a great occasion for volunteers (who have worked on different days throughout the year) to meet up. Some supporters turn up on the day just to be part of this joyful ambience. Our service-users are very appreciative of the time and effort we put in to celebrate Christmas together in such a special way. At the end of the party everyone leaves with a present donated by local businesses. The Christmas presents are organized by Better Bankside as part of their "Together at Christmas gift campaign". Our

Christmas party this year is going to be held on 19th December, a few days before we close for Christmas week - from 23rd to 29th December. On our first day back from Christmas holidays, on 30th, the staff normally carry out a clean-up of the centre and this year will be no exception.

This celebration however may mask the difficulties many of our clients have experienced in their lives and will continue to endure for some time to come. Despite the short reprieve of this festive period, many of them face issues in their lives which they will continue to deal with long after Christmas has passed. For those whose problems stem from difficult experiences with their family or intimate relationships, this period of Christmas may heighten their anxiety. It may make them feel more distressed. Christmas has a special way of drawing people together and making us think of loved ones. Often this is pleasurable, but sometimes it can bring up bad memories. For some of our clients, it may just be that they have no one left they can truly call family and this can be distressing. As much as we can, our advice-workers work in such a ways as to ensure that any housing problems that can be resolved before our Christmas break are resolved so as to minimise any unnecessary distress. But the reality is that even for some who earnestly want to find accommodation, it may only be found after Christmas.

Thankfully, during the week we are closed for Christmas, there is a special organisation appropriately called Crisis at Christmas. They offer both day facilities to the homeless (and the isolated, some of whom are housed) and overnight facilities to verified rough sleepers. They open on 23rd and close on 30th December. It is important to note that for a number of years now, that only verified rough sleepers i.e. known to homelessness agencies or to the police are offered an overnight stay. Before this change service users could access both the day time and overnight facilities. Our advice-workers always ensure that everyone who needs shelter during this period is referred. It is important to say that the police often refer rough sleepers to Crisis at Christmas during this period. The beauty of this project is that it also employs qualified and highly skilled workers who deal with certain issues that can easily be resolved during this short time. Where there are more ongoing and complex issues, that cannot be dealt with in such a short frame of time, they handover these cases to

other relevant organisations to pursue them further. When we come back from leave we often pick up some cases they have started.

Christmas is an important event for humankind as it marks the best in humanity. God being made flesh. However, this Light, this Joy, is not born in a perfect world, but in an imperfect one. Both realities are intertwined. You cannot have one without the other. Both co-exist in all of us. We just need to pay more attention and we will notice them at play in us, in the world and in those around us. This Christmas let us help each other see both sides. Merry Christmas!



Christmas gifts

"This is the Christian's joy: I know that I am a thought in God, no matter how insignificant I may be – the most abandoned of beings, one no one thinks of."

Today, when we think of Christmas gifts, how many outcasts no one thinks of! Think to yourselves, you that are outcasts, you that feel you are nothing in history: "I know that I am a thought in God".

Would that my voice might reach the imprisoned like a ray of light, of Christmas hope – might say also to you, the sick, the elderly in the home for the aged, the hospital patients, you that live in shacks and shantytowns, you coffee harvesters trying to garner your only wage for the whole year, you that are tortured: God's eternal purpose has thought of all of you. He loves you, and like Mary, he incarnates that thought in his womb."

Archbishop Oscar Romero
(From a talk given on 24th December 1978)

Merry 
Christmas 



Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2014

It costs **£33,500 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 (either by cheque or online via our website

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