



The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2016

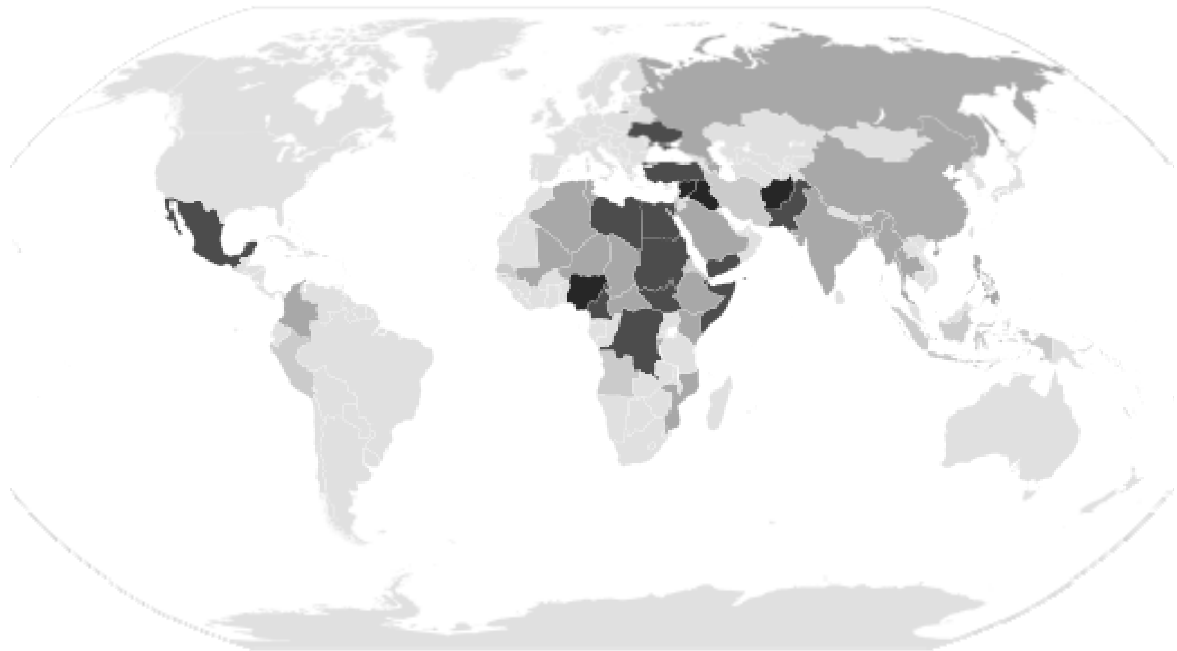


The true meaning of Christmas

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



“How many observe Christ's birthday! How few, His precepts!”

Benjamin Franklin

The map above shows locations of ongoing conflicts worldwide in November 2016. The darker the area on the map, the more affected the country is by a violent conflict. I consider myself very lucky to be born and to live in a light grey area of safety and peace. I also think that we often take this privilege for granted, despite the fact that World War Two ended less than 100 years ago.

Having said that, I must admit, that I felt deeply disgusted and upset by the tone of the Brexit Campaign, especially by the anti-migrants poster featuring a column of Syrian refugees with the slogan, *“We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders”*. It was aimed to stir fear and to incite social hatred whilst using a picture of some very vulnerable people escaping a violent war. Interestingly some of those behind this poster declare that they respect and want to protect Christian values.

As Christmas time is coming again soon I thought it would be good to invite everyone to reflect on why we actually celebrate Christmas and what are the core Christian values at the heart of Christmas? It feels particularly important, when here, in our grey area of peace and safety, we are swept by a frenzy of crazy consumerism, for the two months leading up to Christmas.

I found this quote by Steve Maraboli that in my opinion points out the essence of Christianity: *“Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you.”*

At the Manna Day Centre, we see a lot of refugees from different, war affected countries. Many of them suffer from physical and mental health problems as a result of the traumatic experiences they have had both in their home countries and also on their way to the UK. Some of them, like Amina, open up and share their heart breaking stories with us. She is a woman from Somalia in her early 40s. She is more or less the same age as me but she looks much older. She suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Although her English is still very basic and she cannot explain her story in full, she tells me that her only two kids drowned, while they were all making their way to Europe. She struggles to recover from that trauma and I, as a mother of two, can completely relate to her feelings. If that happened to me, would I ever recover?

It always strikes me how judging and labelling people contributes to division and conflicts. Amina could be described as a Somalian Muslim refugee or as a mother, who lost her two kids, while fleeing war. The first description focuses on differences, the second one on similarities. The first one is linked to all stereotypes, promoted by tabloids and wakes up fear; the second one releases compassion.

I have learned through my work and social interactions, that by having a non-judgemental and loving approach towards others, we can connect with them better. Of course, this is not an easy task as very often we are not even aware that we have actually made a judgement about someone and that judgement has already affected our relationship with that person. Giving someone a negative label like a beggar, a drug addict etc. may prevents us from seeing a suffering human being.

'Love is an absence of judgement' said the Dalai Lama. Non-judgemental, unconditional love toward our fellow human beings is a core value of Christianity. It does not cost and is priceless at the same time. It improves the quality of our lives and rewards both the giver and the receiver. I wish everyone to give and receive a lot of love this Christmas.

Love and peace.



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What Christmas teaches us about life?

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



Christmas is an important moment which calls us to reflect on the meaning of the birth of Christ and its implications on our lives, as Christians and people of goodwill. As I see it, the story of Christmas teaches us about how unpredictable life can be and the way we manage this unpredictability determines who we are and become. It is in wrestling with this unpredictability that Jesus and his family found who they were. Mary and Joseph, although planning to get married, never knew they would be entrusted with looking after the Son of God. But unlike in many world mythologies, including Greek mythology, when Mary gives birth to Jesus, he is born as a Son of Man, facing all the difficulties known to Man. He is not born in a wealthy family, and because of it, he and his family experience many adversities, including exclusion, persecution, poverty and political exile. Jesus does not live in palaces but among the poor of his days.

Another important lesson of Christmas is the way political structures shape our lives. In Jesus's case, his family had to travel miles to Joseph's ancestral home, in Bethlehem, to comply with the census which was being carried out. Despite the fact that Mary was heavily pregnant, it did not stop the family from travelling which indicates to me that the political system was authoritarian and not making allowance for the weak and vulnerable. The authoritarian nature of the system is in full display when the whole family is forced to flee into Egypt to escape the massacre of innocent infants which King Herod unleashes after learning the news about the birth of the Christ. Seeing how even Jesus's life is affected by political decisions, it is one more reason why we ought to ensure that public policy works for everyone, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

However meticulous we may be in planning and making decisions about our lives, there is always an element of unpredictability. There are always unknown factors. For Mary and Joseph, they knew they loved each other and wanted to get married, but they did not expect that Mary would get pregnant so soon. Their plans were thrown in the air. In all our lives, there are always such moments when the unexpected happens. For us it may be an unwanted pregnancy, a member of our family dying, losing a job, an acrimonious divorce, or an illness striking us or a loved one when we least expect it. For many of us, in spite of these problems, life may still turn out reasonably okay. We find a way to cope with our disappointment, what life could have been but never was. We adapt to the new reality. But there are many others who do not recover enough from life challenges or find it too difficult to cope with the pain they cause. We are all in one way or another wounded people, broken people, it is just a matter of degree how well we turn out.

A good percentage of those who have been struck by life adversities come to the Manna Centre for help to get back on their feet, to reset their lives. I am glad that we are continuing to offer the space for them to find themselves again, to find new meaning for their lives and ready themselves for a new turning in their lives. Our help is holistic and ranges from food, shower facilities and healthcare, to resettling people into accommodation for people to rediscover independent living again.

The story of Christmas is a great illustration about the way public policy and political decisions affect ordinary people. For Mary it was travelling miles away when she was heavily pregnant. And because of King Herod's decision to hunt Jesus down, the whole family was forced to go into exile to escape death. But for our clients who use the Manna Centre, their lives are affected by political decisions which have been and are being taken about the welfare system and housing. As affordable housing becomes scarcer even for the middle class, it is easy to lose sight of the plight of homeless people who are increasingly facing a tougher time of finding suitable accommodation. For most homeless people, social housing has long ceased being an option. They rely on the private-rented sector to find accommodation and when they do, housing benefits are capped too low and many landlords refuse to let their property to people on low income.

Our new year's resolution must be include raising the case of homeless people so that public policy-making takes into account their needs. After all, it is through the poor and the vulnerable Jesus identifies the most. By ensuring justice for the poor and vulnerable in our midst, we live out the true meaning of Christmas. This is so that, as scriptures say in Luke 3:5, "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth". Merry Christmas!

Learning from our neighbours

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



“Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.”

Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose

I have just read an article stating that Shelter’s homeless helpline receives a call every 30 seconds asking for help. The volume of calls to their helpline has risen by 50,000 over the last 12 months with **one in four** cases being from people already homeless or about to lose their home in 28 days, many from within the private rented sector. In our current private rental market, the most security that tenants can expect is from 6 months to 1 year. That’s OK if the market is students or as a staging post for those waiting to move onto the property ladder. That is not the case anymore and the already homeless are the hardest hit in this new world

Our rental market has not kept pace with its consumers. Many renters today will want a long-term rental opportunity as that is the only expectation they can have of a roof over their head. When surveyed 7 out of 10 private renters said that this was very important to them.

What can we learn from others?

This really behoves our society to look more deeply at how we can address this situation and if we are going to make private rented really work, let’s learn from societies where there is a mature rented sector. I have been looking at a report published by Shelter just this autumn called “Time for Reform: How our neighbours with mature private renting markets guarantee stability for renters”.

Many of our near neighbours in Europe have vibrant private renting sectors that balance the needs of landlords and private tenants so that there is a chance that they can grow old in a private rented tenancy if so required. Previously studies have tended to look at Germany or the Netherlands as shining beacons but this new report looked at 32 countries and 4 key aspects of tenancy law.

- The minimum period within which the tenant is protected from eviction without grounds
- The grounds on which tenants can be evicted (such as rent arrears)
- The tenants’ power to end the tenancy before the end of the minimum term
- The restrictions on rent increases within the minimum term

Sure, the report indicates that government intervention was required but it was used to rectify the free markets quite natural inability to provide secure renting. Sadly, this is the model we in the UK are bound to.

Does it affect supply?

What it also showed is that these interventions did not have a negative effect on supply. With only moderate levels of government interventions, some **80 million plus across those 32 markets** are renting privately where more than 1 year’s rental is the norm. Only 7 million were renting with only a 1 year tenancy. Our near neighbours such as Ireland through rental reforms made a decade ago enjoy much greater security as will those in Scotland, as a result of legal changes earlier in the year.

What do we need to do?

It’s time to recognise that renters will never able to negotiate more security without the backing of legislation. It’s time to intervene and correct the market failures that leave so many renters worried about losing their home and feeling like they don’t control their lives.

Extend the period of legal protection

In the UK, private renters only have legal protection for 6 months. Shelter's report shows that

- In five countries tenants get between one and three years' protection
- In three countries they get over three years, but less than ten
- In nine, tenants get permanent protection from eviction for no reason and can only be evicted on legal grounds (such as rent arrears, anti-social behaviour or the landlord needing to sell the property)

Increased flexibility to bring a tenancy to an end

In many European countries, tenants can also bring their tenancy to an end if they can provide proper notice. In most cases though they must give up to three months' notice if they intend to leave.

Limiting rent increases

This legislation is not there to control market rents but it is there to prevent landlords from giving notice so that they can raise the rent dramatically overnight. Various countries use different mechanisms e.g. In Ireland, there is a restriction on raising rent above the market level for a similar property in the same area. In Belgium, it works on an index system or sometimes above a certain percentage over a given period – this is the system that the French use. There are many other examples. This works to give renters more certainty about future rents in the period that their tenancy covers and prevents intentional eviction due to massive rent hikes.

England now has the third largest population of private tenants of any European country.

Surely it is time to re-look at this sector whilst we wait for the Government's promise to build 1 million new homes by 2020. For decades after World War Two the UK used to build more than 300,000 new homes a year. Recently it's managed about half that – there are all sorts of reasons for this which I won't explore in this particular article but they are many and varied.

Everyone deserves a roof over their head, it is one of the most basic securities that you can have in life. And if systems don't work, then we must raise our voices so that the people for whom we voted make sure that they do. Maybe this is one thing we can do at Christmas as the following quote urges us to do:

"Far too often, it is at the moment where we finally stand on the very precipice of some great thing that we turn and abandon it, for it is at these seminal moments that fear wins and greatness dies. The beauty of Christmas is that God steps over precipices." Craig D. Lounsbrough

And, finally, heartfelt wishes for your peace and happiness this Christmas and my continued thanks for helping us through another year.



***"The light of the Christmas star to you.
The warmth of home and hearth to you.
The cheer and goodwill of friends to you.
The hope of a child-like heart to you.
The joy of a thousand angels to you.
The love of the Son and God's peace to you."***

Sherryl Woods

Please take care of yourselves and those dear to you.



Merry Christmas

“They say that youth is wasted on the young” ...

By

Louisa Toland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



Well “they” are wrong. Young people today are suffering some of the most economically strained times in recent history. Even if I compare it to when I was a young adult, things have continued to spiral. Of course my experiences are from a certain perspective, but you might be surprised, that lack of prospects and housing opportunities reaches far and wide, especially for young Londoners.

I am sure this is an experience shared not only by youth in other UK cities but also across other major European metropolitan cities. People might generalise and stereotype homeless people, but I can tell you that it is not always what you think when it comes to ending up on the street.

Young people have a lot to deal with now, and without job opportunities and stringent benefit rules, which seem to actively act against youth, it is no surprise that the young homeless are growing in numbers.

Figures from charity Crisis show, that in 5 years the number of young people sleeping rough in London has more than doubled. Young people make up 20% of those presenting for statutory support and half of those are seeking advice from homeless services. According to Crisis 82% of under 25s who go to the Local Authority are currently deemed ineligible. They will not be assisted by the Council. Hidden homeless figures will be much greater, both those hidden on the streets and not accessing services, and people sofa surfing moving from friend to friends.

The Local Authority here in Southwark often makes direct referrals to us at Manna; the non-priorities 18-25 age group come to seek housing assistance.

The majority of these young people do not have an addiction, a mental health problem, or a criminal conviction. The stereotypical people have of what type of person falls into the homeless category could not be more wrong.

What they often have is part time jobs. Or they might be looking for work or in jobs with zero hours contracts on minimum wage, no set hours, and no stability. They could be given notice to go any day with little or no warning. Some have 2 part time jobs, busting their backsides, still barely earning enough to survive. Not a hope of finding affordable rented accommodation.

Housing Benefit rules mean that under 35 s have to rent in shared properties. Shared affordable accommodation is hard to come by, particularly in London. Plenty of people share, it is a highly normalised way of living a little more economically in London. But most shared housing is for the young professionals, university educated and with feet at least on some rung of the housing ladder, even if it is close to the bottom.

The common complaint from the mainstream middle class media is that the poor young people can’t afford a deposit for their “first forever home”. Please... this is the argument of the well-heeled, obsessed with property ownership, like it’s some god given right, for all the poor lambs and their future offspring.

Overlooking the fact that what should be an absolute right in this modern slick rich democratic society is the right to a basic home. Instead there are young people left right and centre who do not even have basic shelter, not a rented one bed, not a room in a shared house, not a hostel, not even a night shelter.

Remember Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of needs, the triangle of requirements that make up our basic needs beginning with Physiological i.e. Food, water, warmth, rest. Basic needs which work its way up to Self-Actualisation- "achieving ones full potential".

Some young people are just about surviving, trying to cope with the stresses of looking for work, job continuity, debt and financial stresses. All of these acts on peoples self-esteem and moral, emotional and physical health suffer, and with no way of finding adequate housing to boot. Put a very simple family dispute, into the mix or longer term family problems and this increases the potential for young people to end up on the street. Not complex, not vulnerable, not unstable, just life, for your average young person who cannot fall back on family support, or family finance.

Here at Manna we can and do help support young people as best we can with the resources we have. The partners we work with are not always able to be youth friendly because of the rules around housing benefit for the young. Despite this there are some positive outcomes and some young people headed at least in the in the right direction.

I have been working with a young man, let's call him Sean, he is 25 with a fairly fraught family backstory. Since being in London for the last 8 years he has wandered in and out of various hostels. These hostels come with support and are meant to have move on opportunities for both housing and employment. In Sean's case, he found the hostel system overwhelming. He did not necessarily feel treated like an individual with his needs being considered or met. So rather than making progress in the hostels, he actually reverted into himself, becoming more and more introverted lacking confidence, motivation and self-worth.

Work is not an easy option for him as he has no previous work history, sensitive to all around him, ducking and diving in and out of social groups in the hostels, some of whom who are on some destructive paths. Intermittent homelessness after various hostel stays, this has been his young experience up until now. After seeking advice in the Local Authority he comes to us.

We get to know Sean and begin working with him, towards helping him off the street. We do not refer him to hostels, in his case it has not been a success and he is in a revolving door of hostel to street and street to hostel, although this would be the quickest and simplest option to get him off the street.

He believes and understands from the onset that the root we take will be time consuming and will not reap immediate results but with work and patience his life could change.

We work with a provision that exists for long term rough sleepers. It is not easy to access, proven sustained rough sleeping must apply to the person. So their history thus far must be known to homeless street teams for them to be eligible. With Sean this is possible. We track his history and create the thread that sews it together. Then we put together his housing history, his experience and his health issues. All these things are actually quite complex and time consuming when one is considering a life experience such as Sean's. Certainly through no fault of his own he has been a rolling stone. We finally make the application, which are then examined by the organisation, who looks at it forensically and with a fine tooth comb. Any errors or gaps or if it is felt there is insufficient information the application is returned to us. Back and forth it goes whilst Sean remains steadfast and on the street. While this time consuming process goes back and forth between us and

the other agency, we find Sean a night shelter. At least now he can get some warmth, food and rest. While we wait for him to be accepted into the project.

After what seems like a long time, he is finally accepted. First he will be interviewed by the social housing provider, then the floating support team who will work with him when he is residing at the housing association property. He is due to move into social housing in the coming weeks, hopefully before Christmas. This will be his first independent tenancy. He is also receiving help from an employment service we helped him get in touch with. He will be off the streets and out of night shelters for the first time in eight years this winter.

This scenario will not be possible for many young people who use our services, because: 1. they are not walking/sleeping on streets, so they cannot be verified as rough sleepers. They stay on night buses, go from friend to friends, anything to avoid the streets. 2. They are working, low paid jobs, either part or full time, making them ineligible for most hostels, which prefer people to be on full housing benefit. In their case the options are limited, shared affordable housing is a tough commodity to find. We can work with hostels for some young people and now at this time of year there are winter shelters opening up to help people off the street and out of the cold at least during the winter months. There are ways, but shamefully also limits.

Young, disenfranchised (non-voting) people, will continue to be side-lined, ignored and actively subjected to painful social security restrictions. Further Housing benefit restrictions are being considered for under 21s in recent times.

With your support we will continue to try and innovate and be creative in trying to solve these tricky cases.

Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2016

It costs approx. **£40,000 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) or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form (available from our website)? If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 25% 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: _____