

The Manna Society Newsletter

Spring 2024

Working with homeless people & those in need



Watch out for the angels in your life!

By
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Manna Centre Director



Churches and schools often call on me to speak on our work. From time to time, they're quite specific about the kind of talk they want from me. Like recently, at the start of Lent, a church asked me to preach on their assigned gospel passage, Mark 1:12-15. It's Mark's rendering of Jesus's time in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry on earth. Mark tells us that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert without eating and drinking, surrounded by wild animals and angels looking after him. My reflection on the passage, I must say, wasn't too closely aligned with the passage itself, which is primarily about sacrifice. I widened its scope and placed it in a larger frame of suffering. I began, as I do now in this article, by talking about suffering in general and ended with sacrifice as it applies more specifically to the spirit of Lent. I outline in this article the substance of my talk to the church on the first Sunday of Lent.

Truth be told, none of us likes suffering. But suffering is part of human existence. Our dislike of suffering doesn't make it go away. But for some of us who believe in a loving and perfect God, this poses a challenge. Why does a God who is loving and perfect allow suffering to take place? An incurable illness, a natural disaster killing hundreds of people, wars of all kinds, poverty, are all examples of situations which cause us great suffering.

Most of my friends who are agnostics, or atheists, often tell me that they can't reconcile the idea of the existence of a perfect and loving God with the idea of such a God allowing suffering in the universe to take place. They claim that the two ideas are simply irreconcilable: they're incongruent. I don't know why God allows suffering to happen, but what I know is that suffering is part of life – there is no escaping from it. And on this point at least even my atheist and agnostic friends and I all agree.

Suffering starts from the very first breath we take on earth till the very last breath we breathe. A baby who has just been born, who doesn't cry, raises suspicion that something might be going wrong. Doctors expect them to cry because of being exposed to a new environment and cold air. This should normally make them cry right away. With this cry they expand their lungs and expel their amniotic fluid and mucus. But as we grow older and sophisticated, our cry often becomes more silent, hidden away from prying eyes.

On the one hand, whilst suffering in general can feel arbitrary and unfair, sacrifice, on the other hand, feels more bearable because it includes an element of choice. We voluntarily forgo immediate comfort, gain, benefit, and pleasure. But there must be a promise for greater gain, whether spiritual, moral, mental, physical, or material, in kind. Although as Christians we primarily seek spiritual and moral gain, the result of our sacrifice can also be physical and material. I still remember giving up sugar in my coffee many years ago and being weaned off sugar altogether. This simple act of sacrifice has contributed in helping me keep diabetes at bay.

For Lent, we take our cue from Jesus who first set the example by going to the wilderness and being tested and enduring suffering. We choose to forgo certain things we enjoy doing to draw nearer to God. We share in Jesus's suffering so that we can also share in his glory. It's meant to uplift our spirits. And in this practice, we can discover that although there is suffering there is also peace, joy and hope. Suffering may smother them at times, but they still can prevail. They can at the very least co-exist. They're bedfellows.

As Christians, we've often focused on the reference to the wild animals, who to some represent devilish spirits, not necessarily animals in the real sense. But we tend to pay little attention to the angels, Mark mentions, who looked after Jesus during the very first Lent. They sustained him and kept him going. Much the same as with our

modern-day living. Caught in suffering, we tend to focus on the wild beasts who attack us, the devilish spirits, personal circumstances, but neglect the angels who come our way to comfort us and sustain us in our distress and suffering. Often, we're too caught up with other things to notice.

When I look back to my first years in the UK, as an asylum-seeker, I met many such angels who looked after me. One in particular touched me in a way that I'll never forget. On my arrival in the UK in the early 1990's, I was placed in a detention centre. A Jesuit brother, Bernard Elliot, visited us, refugee detainees, and noticed that I wore a sleeveless shirt. Although it was April, when the weather isn't that cold, for someone who came fresh out of Africa, it felt cold. At his next visit he gave me a jumper which he'd brought for me. My very first jumper in the UK! Acts like that uplift our spirits. No doubt we can all think of moments like that in our lives when someone made a difference in our lives. Angels exist and are all around us. When we're struggling, we need to pay closer attention to them so that we're not left alone having to deal with life's suffering.

I see my colleagues at work as angels, not that they're perfect, far from it. They'd be the first to acknowledge their own imperfections and shortcomings. Any way, they don't need to be perfect to be playing angelic roles. The only qualification is to be able to make people's lives more bearable and enjoyable. They cook food, serve it, clean, patiently talk to people when they're in distress. I'm proud to belong to such a team and lead it. The same can be said of our supporters who fund us and offer us their time.

The call for us all during this Lent is to sacrifice something we love doing momentarily, in imitation of Jesus, for spiritual and moral growth. Indeed, beyond this momentary suffering done out of choice, our personal circumstances may mean that we continue to deal with suffering of one kind or another. Whether we endure suffering as a choice, through sacrifice, or as suffering through life's arbitrary circumstances, let's keep watching out for the angels God sends our way to look after us. We may need to open our eyes to see them. In accepting to endure suffering, we might achieve peace, joy, and hope, despite the suffering.

Many thanks to the 11 people from SRL Traffic Systems, Skanska, Costain & Hatton Traffic Management who did a sponsored sleepout for us on the 29th February (some pictured below).



*Their JustGiving page is:
<https://www.justgiving.com/page/claire-woodhouse-1706621502823>*

Is homelessness a lifestyle choice?

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



Last November Suella Braverman asserted that homelessness was a lifestyle choice. Although she is no longer Home Secretary forthcoming legislation will have significant impacts on homeless people - if that legislation is passed into law.

The Criminal Justice Bill

The new Criminal Justice Bill which is at report stage in the House of Commons has been introduced to replace the Vagrancy Act 1824. The Bill contains new powers for police and local authorities to enforce against so-called 'nuisance rough sleeping' in England and Wales. These powers include being moved on, a fine up to £2,500 and even imprisonment.

The Bill makes provision for action by the police if a person is what has been termed "nuisance rough sleeping" – that is, they could be considered a "nuisance" if found rough sleeping in a doorway, if found to have "excessive smell" or even if it looks like they are contemplating or intending to sleep on the streets – the legislation seems to be attacking people for merely fitting stereotypes of what someone experiencing homelessness looks or acts like. In London, it is estimated that one Londoner becomes homeless every 8.5 minutes – it is hard to believe that this is a lifestyle choice – it is purely a matter of survival.

In the light of the following statistics from a Crisis' report entitled "It's no life at all", would anyone choose homelessness as a lifestyle choice?

- rough sleepers are almost 17 times more likely to have been victims of violence compared to general members of the public.
- Women are particularly vulnerable with nearly 1 in 4 having been sexually assaulted while rough sleeping.
- Seventy-seven per cent (353) of survey respondents reported anti-social behaviour and/or crime against them in the past 12 months.
- Three in ten (30%) of rough sleepers interviewed reported being deliberately hit or kicked or experiencing another form of violence.
- Almost half (45%/206) of current or recent rough sleepers surveyed said they had been intimidated or threatened with violence or force.
- Verbal abuse was the most common form of anti-social behaviour experienced; with over half of respondents (56%) being verbally abused or harassed.
- Thirty per cent (31%) had had things thrown at them and in seven per cent of cases rough sleepers had been urinated on.

Over 53% of such acts went unreported mostly in the belief that the police would take no action. Rough sleepers reported how living on the streets meant living in fear and having to navigate constant risk and uncertainty about their safety. That the fear and isolation that results from living on the streets affected their physical health.

Most saddening, the toll on well-being pushed some to question the relevance of their existence and completely undermined their confidence and well-being and their ability to move on. Among the people we see, long-term rough sleeping or living long-term in very insecure accommodation saps their ability to function independently, have faith in their choices and feel able to achieve their aims. We work with women who have experienced sexual assault – they express a lot of fear, and their experience often results in triggering various emotions and distrust that makes coping with everyday life significantly more difficult for them.

It is hard to believe that people made an active choice to subject themselves to such a future. Once again, I repeat, it is survival not lifestyle. We have heard much about those people resorting to living in a tent on the streets. This is someone's desperate attempt to stay alive and protect themselves against the elements and daily threats to their lives. Criminalising someone for using their survival instinct and trying to protect themselves isn't right and doesn't make sense.

The decision of the government to repeal the 'antiquated' Vagrancy Act was made on the basis that 'no one should be criminalised simply for having nowhere to live'. Is this new Act really a compassionate and realistic answer to the plight of those on the street. I don't see how it can be argued as such.

What should the Spring Statement consider?

Moving away from the thought of unnecessarily punitive legislation, perhaps we can move on to reflect on how policy can help those at the extremities of homelessness – that is, rough sleeping to securing a roof over their head. **Rough sleeping in London rose by 23% in the last quarter of 2023, the most since City Hall started collecting statistics in 2014.** More than half those recorded were rough sleeping for the first time. One in five of those helped to get inside during the Greater London Authority's cold weather initiative this month were refugees who had recently left Home Office accommodation. Government rules give newly recognised refugees just 28 days to move on. It is clear that the Government's pledge to end rough sleeping by the end of this parliament is not going to be achieved.

Homeless Link recently published their submission for consideration in the Spring Statement from the Chancellor. It is undoubtedly a positive move that the Local Housing Allowance rates will not be frozen from April 2024 – after 4 years in which it has been frozen, thus, making it harder to find affordable private rented accommodation. There was also a one-time investment in the 2023 Spring Budget but short-lived initiatives such that in the end provide short term breathing space.

Photo by Timur Weber

What I would like to do is to put the position of many services in context:

- Homeless Link's annual review 2023 revealed that 66% of homelessness accommodation providers have services that are no longer financially viable because of lack of inflationary increases in commissioned and grant funded projects.
- 36% already reduced services to meet inflationary pressures. As budget remain static, some services are already closing their doors.
- Many are eating into their reserves to survive.
- The number of bed spaces in housing providers has already dropped by 20%
- There has been a significant upsurge in homelessness support with rough sleeping figures rising by 26% in 2023. This was the largest increase year-on-year since 2015.

- In the Homeless Link research, many respondents reported a steep rise in people turning to service for help coupled with a rise in the number of cases with complex needs especially with severe physical and mental health issues. It is clear that the homelessness sector is now the key source of support for many suffering severe unmet support needs.
- Respondents to the Homeless Link survey also reported that as costs have risen, services are now starting to turn people away.
- There is a real concern that if there is no remedial action, the number of people sleeping rough may well pass the peak recorded in 2017.
- That would be a real tragedy as much of the good work done to reduce rough sleeping will be compromised and result in many more people being exposed to the traumatic experience of homelessness that we touched on earlier in this article.
- Local authorities are facing severe financial distress with many facing almost impossible decisions as to which services they are able to assist with funding – the Local Government Association has found that half of local authorities were not confident that they will have enough funds to “fulfil their legal duties” in the forthcoming fiscal year.
- As councils make these decisions, those services that cater for those deemed not to be in “priority need” and thus not eligible for housing support through the local authority may not be able to access a homelessness support service which are essential lifelines for the what is described as “non-family homelessness” – that means single homeless, many of whom need a low level of support through to those who do have intersecting complex support needs.
- Homelessness support services provide a wider role in promoting health and wellbeing and reducing demand on other services. It can be argued that if services are reduced, increased pressure on public services will wipe out any savings made – potentially pushing costs downstream. Greater Change have estimated that a homeless person costs £29,000 of funds from the public purse – a far greater cost than if effective intervention was possible – where the cost would be in the area of £1,300 or even less to place them in accommodation.

That’s why a service such as ours is so invaluable to those who come through our doors. It is not just the housing that matters – in the Advice & Welfare service we deal with benefit issues, maximising people’s income so that they have access to grants and get the financial support they are entitled to through the benefit system, helping them settle into tenancies by setting up utilities and obtaining funds for essential furnishings, helping them to regularise their status in the UK by signposting to expert immigration advisers, dealing with debt management, help people to sustain their tenancies and so on – if we cannot solve the problem among our skill sets or expertise, we will help them find someone who will do.



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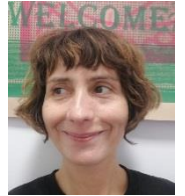
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Swings and Roundabouts

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



In December's newsletter my colleagues and I highlighted the homelessness crisis faced by refugees. I just wanted to say that it is still happening and as far as I know, no steps have been taken by central government to address it. Newly recognised refugees are still given a maximum of 28 days to vacate their asylum support accommodation and many of them end up rough sleeping. It is sad beyond comprehension. We see those people in the centre, we hear their stories, and we would really like decision makers to listen to them too. It is easy to create a policy if you do not have to face the person who is affected by it. Also, it has to be said that all those austerity measures have also had a huge impact on frontline workers because, at the end of the day, it is us who have to deal with the frustration, poverty and mess created. Only a week ago my colleague helped a young refugee woman to get into a winter shelter. When she got there, she was taken ill and had to be taken to an Accident and Emergency Department to get help. Due to her illness, as she would have been in close quarters with others in the shelter, they were unable to have her back until she was well again. We found and paid for alternative accommodation for her for four nights, until she was well enough to return to the shelter. If her time on the street has not been the cause of her infection, it certainly exacerbated it.

We have changed the system of accessing housing advice in the centre as we could not cope with the overwhelming demand. Currently people need to call extension 1 on a Monday to register for our accommodation list. We take up to a maximum of 20 names and then book appointments for them as and when our capacity allows. On Mondays we are overwhelmed by the number of callers. Not only is extension 1 inundated with calls but our other extensions are also. Our phones do not stop ringing and I have to put my extension on 'do not disturb' in order to be able to work. This shows that the demand for accommodation is still super high. Anyway, let's move on to some recent positive stories from the advice service.

We finally managed to get £450 compensation from EDF for our client who had missed out on Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) vouchers. The EBSS scheme was a part of government help last year to assist households with the rising costs of energy bills. It was offered as a £400 non-repayable discount, and it was automatically delivered in six instalments to every household in the UK. My client, a disabled lady, a lone mother of two school age children, came to see me last year as she had not received this essential assistance. She has been living in temporary accommodation provided by a London council from 2017 and was paying EDF for her electricity supply. She was on a pre-payment meter. We contacted EDF and it transpired that her meter was not registered with the UK Power Network hence no vouchers has been issued. It took us few months to resolve that, and we complained to both her landlord and to EDF. Eventually in December EDF accepted responsibility for the unregistered meter and issued compensation to my client.

We successfully managed to apply for a passport via a consulate for one of our EU clients. It may not sound a huge achievement, but it actually was. Raul is a highly vulnerable individual, who has suffered from mental health problems since his adolescence. He is a citizen of an Eastern European country and he came to the UK just before Covid 19. We do not know how he came, with whom he came, nor what his plans were – he is not able to tell us his story due to his condition. All we know is that he ended up on the street during the pandemic and was housed under the Covid 19 provisions. He abandoned that accommodation at some point and returned

to rough sleeping. This is how we came across him at the Manna in mid-2022. At that time he had no documents, no status in the UK and was acutely unwell. We worked together with a Mental Health Outreach Team to help him. Sadly the Consulate of his country of origin was not very helpful and refused to arrange a passport appointment for him outside of their normal booking system. We had to book it via their unhelpful online system. We had to apply for funding for his passport too as the Consulate rejected our request to use their discretion and lift the fee. When we booked the first one in October 2022, Rasul could not attend as he was hospitalized. A few months later we were lucky enough to book it again and although Raul was keen on getting there, and we reminded him on the day, and arranged for a support worker to accompany him, he had forgotten. Again the Consulate refused to re-schedule it and we had to go through the whole procedure from scratch. This time we managed to book it and thanks to the determination of his support workers he successfully attended his appointment in February this year and we are waiting for his passport to be issued.

Through the eyes of a Newbie

By

Chinasa Nnoka

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I'm a Housing and Welfare Adviser and the newest member of the team at the Manna Society, having joined in November last year. I came during a spike in demand for the Housing Services offered here, caused by the Government fast tracking the award of Refugee status to Asylum seekers who then must find their own accommodation and their way in Society generally.

I see my role as helping this place function in part like a CAB for homeless people and those who in need. The work draws on various skills, knowledge bases and emotions. Some days it seems as if most of the appointments are housing interviews - whether new clients or existing ones with outstanding issues. In all this the emotions generated can vary. I've experienced bewilderment and mild irritation, thinking sometimes – "an attitude for gratitude wouldn't go amiss Sir/Ma'am" I have often admired the clients I've interviewed seeing their resilience and the other side of their stories, the former drink and drug addicted street homeless person who has since held a tenancy for over twenty years. The young man who has left his family behind where his life was endangered simply because he was a male. He had arrived here with a basic grasp of the English language, and I learned that he had worked in Education and at home, had already enrolled in college here and was determined to restart that career.

A significant proportion of the homeless Newly Recognized Refugees have a poor command of English and whilst many of them would want to attend ESOL (English as a Second Language) classes and may have already started these, it stops when they become homeless, and the Manna doesn't have a Translation service. This has stimulated me to speak English more plainly and slowly remembering that I would be just as disadvantaged linguistically if I had suddenly arrived in their country and was unable to speak the language.

My favourite client from this contingent was a young man (the majority of Newly Recognized Refugees whom I have seen are male) in his twenties. He had been to another European Country, learned the language and studied there, which impressed me, but he was unable to stay there. Upon arrival here he became homeless after getting his status and started working in a market whilst sleeping on the Streets. He would arrive for work

often sleepy because he hadn't been able to rest properly and he was sacked. When I saw him and referred him to one of our providers for accommodation, he was reluctant to take them as they seemed far away and he didn't have any transport money. I advised that we could assist initially with an Oyster card (someone had recently donated some). He decided to accept as he said that it was better than being homeless. He was accommodated very shortly afterwards - some of his contemporaries aren't nearly this pragmatic!

The amount of hard and valuable work that goes on here is laudable, the Centre is open seven days a week, some staff arrive here shortly after 5am!!!!!!! and all seem to care about what they do and that's not common. Manna is highly respected - businesses nearby give goods and individuals donate in cash and kind regularly which all help tremendously.

When I speak to people about Manna, it doesn't seem well known, but people are impressed by what they hear and rightly so! This is an organization that has had a positive impact on so many lives and its services are free; a rare gem of a charity and I am proud to be part of it.

Most needed items

*We are in need of sugar, toilet rolls & tea mugs.
Any help you can give would be appreciated.*



*Would you like to help address our £100,000 deficit
and to get fit into the bargain?*

The London 10K Run takes place on Sunday 14th July 2024.

Starting at Piccadilly & finishing on Whitehall

Passing St James Palace, Trafalgar Square,

St Paul's Cathedral, Big Ben,

Westminster Abbey & Parliament Square.

**If you feel up to the challenge and can raise a minimum of £200 we would be
delighted to hear from you.**

Please contact Paddy at mail@mannasociety.org.uk

More information about the run itself can be found at

<https://www.thelondon10k.com/>