

Sermon for the 18th of May 2025 at St Thomas on the Bourne Homelessness 5th Sunday of Easter

Sandy has asked me to be the Warm Up for tonight's special meeting "Understanding Homelessness". I hope you'll have all seen the invitation leaflet and that you will want to come this evening. So how can I contribute to understanding what is a very challenging and complex situation?

Let me begin by asking you to imagine you are in Southwark Cathedral in the year 1995, the date 17th November. Some of you here, I'm sure, were there. It was the day when Chris Herbert was consecrated as Bp of St Alban's.

This is what the preacher, the then Bp of Guildford, Bishop Michael Adie, said in his address on that day. I quote:-

"These days we do not often speak of the bishop of St Albans as Bp of St Alban's, but rather as Bishop Chris, almost as a pet name we'd use for domesticated animals as though bishops were ecclesiastical retrievers rather than national guide dogs for the blind. "

"The title of Bishop of St Alban's firmly asserts that he is not just a chum in the church but a man in our culture and society with responsibility for the life of that town, county and the nation at large."

As we are all members of Christ's Church it is not only bishops but all of us as members of Christ's Body who are called to live out our faith as best we can, and respond as best we can, to the needs of our parish, town and the world.

.Today is our AGM when after this service rightly and properly we will be reviewing and thanking God for the life of this amazing parish. But how can we be helped to see beyond our well-oiled parish organisation, beyond our boundaries, beyond our buildings, beyond our music, beyond our finances?

You may possibly have heard of the Churches 5 Marks of Mission. They have been adopted by the C of E and the worldwide Anglican Community. Let me read them .

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| 1 To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom | To Tell |
| 2 To teach, baptize and nurture new believers | To Teach |
| 3 To respond to human need by loving service | To Tender |
| 4 To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation | To Transform |

5 To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth
To Treasure

(You can see them in the Foyer.)

.. Today we are invited to understand more about homelessness, what causes homelessness, what we can do about it and how we might respond. A few months ago, we focused on refugees. Both of these complicated subjects are this parish's attempt to respond to the 3rd and 4th marks of mission.

The third mark of the church is to respond to human need by loving service. And the fourth mark is to seek to transform unjust structures of society.

There are plenty of giants who have gone before us who have lived their lives responding to human needs, tending to the poor and oppressed, and working and seeking to transform unjust structures in society. This often meant being active in politics. People like William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, William Booth, William Carlisle, Mother Teresa, Bp Trevor Huddleston - the list is endless.

So what is our perception of homelessness? Is it anything to do with us as a parish or as individuals? Is it anything to do with our councillors, our MPs ? What are the causes ? What can we do ?

Understanding homelessness is challenging and complex and I have to admit that living for the past 33 years in Farnham homelessness hardly seems a problem. I easily forget that it is a huge problem for many, many individuals and families. Go to any big city and you will soon see rough sleepers in doorways, train stations and bus shelters, shop fronts. Official government statistics published this March show that it is a growing problem, and the need for affordable housing in every city and town is acute. Allow me to share my limited experience of people who have become homeless or need a home

At my theological college, which was also a monastery, we had a stream of homeless men who regularly called for food and a hot drink. They were treated with great respect and referred to as angels, God's unseen messengers.

As a young curate in Poplar E London, I remember a lot of us young clergy going on a protest rally with BP Huddleston. It was the time of the Canary Wharf development. East Londoners were being pushed out of the area. We stood with our placards on the building site of what was to become the Tower Hotel just by Tower Bridge. We were protesting because blocks of council flats were being threatened with demolition because they would ruin the view from the Tower Hotel. Unfortunately, our protest was unsuccessful. But then that was a double tragedy because the hotel that was built became known as the ugliest in London.

Becoming a responsible vicar with a wife, a large vicarage and, as yet, no children, we were able to fill empty rooms with a mixed group of residents, some homeless, some ex-offenders, some with addictions. some unemployed. We were quite a community. If you got a seat in the living-room you were lucky.

Many parishioners needed legal advice about rent arrears, debts etc. What was needed was a legal aid centre. I got into big trouble with my boss and the diocese because we knocked two rooms together with the help of friendly dockers and a Kango hammer. It turned out to be a great success and the diocese and my boss did eventually come round!

I also remember going on an Urban Ministry Project designed to give young clergy a taste of life being homeless on the streets of London without having the role of being clergy and without the protection of a dog collar. I spent several days and nights in London with nothing but 50p. It was a wake-up call. I shall never forget it.

When I lived in Coventry there was a huge amount of council housing and housing associations which meant those unable to get a mortgage could get a roof over their heads via shared ownership. Now most council housing has been sold. And there are fewer and fewer housing associations.

During a sabbatical in the United States. I lodged with a wonderful community of Franciscan sisters in San Francisco. They helped run an all-day centre for the many homeless in San Francisco. Lunches were prepared and served every day for a hundred or so homeless men and women. I particularly remember the lunch decorated and a tree hung with the names of all those who had died on the streets. Some days I spent a few hours in the city centre begging for money for the homeless. The money was used to make soup which we then took out at 5am in the morning for those who were sleeping rough - in doorways on the pavement. They were an amazing mixture of individuals. I particularly remember ex-prisoners, an ex-Baptist minister, an ex-police officer, all of whom had fallen on hard times, gone off the rails, or had suffered some kind of trauma..

Moving to Farnham in the 90's I thought homelessness would be non-existent - how wrong I was. Very often in the 90's, and I mean once or twice a week, there would be knocking on the rectory front door, usually late in the evening. Some poor soul was homeless and hungry. Angela and I provided food and drink as best we could and occasionally a bed for the night in our parish rooms. It became obvious that a hostel for the homeless was needed here in Farnham. A group was set up which included Anne Mansell and John Stephens, both members of St Thomas', and after lobbying and financial support Winter Watch was set up at the Elms, in Fairfield near the station. After a few years the Elms closed, and Winter Watch moved to the Redgrave Theatre, which was by then just a shell.

It was at the Elms that my eldest daughter, who had just graduated in sociology, met her life-long partner. They both became assistant managers running the Elms. During the following years my daughter helped run a purpose-built Wet hostel in Shepherd's Bush for the charity Broadway, while Pete, her partner, was an outreach worker for the homeless in the City of London with the charity St Mungo's.

Year by year there were fewer knocks on the rectory door but still plenty of people needing help. One man I got to know and visit was living under a wet and soggy tarpaulin in the woods just below Barfield School. He was a loner who had been sentenced to a youth Detention Center for a minor offence. I think it was stealing apples. It shattered his life.

Another ex-military had been traumatised by his army experience and was living in the woods in Crondall. We managed to get them both housed, one in a housing association flat near the station and one in one of the Almshouses in West St.

Living in a vicarage or rectory left an indelible mark on my children, or maybe it's in the genes, but it makes me very proud that my second daughter worked for the Big Issue in Manchester for 10 years. She was responsible for befriending and supporting Big Issue sellers in Manchester and other outposts in the North Of England.

Thinking about it today has stirred my memory. Situations I had all but forgotten.

Apart from the occasional rough sleeper and Big Issue seller, homelessness in Farnham hardly seems to be a problem. But it is a huge problem nationally. A huge problem in our cities and many towns, including our next-door neighbor Aldershot. Our hostels were shut down long ago. Housing associations are dwindling. Thousands of individuals and families are finding it impossible to get on the property ladder or even find enough to rent.

Thinking about homelessness and recalling to mind my own very limited experiences has reminded me that this is the Eastertide and we are called to be Easter People, people of the resurrection, people who know that God loves them and they want to show that love by loving our neighbours, whether they live in Farnham, Aldershot or London. People who look out beyond our parishes. People who at least try to understand and respond to the needs of other people. As the 3rd and 4th marks of mission remind the whole Church, people who are called tend and transform.

Today's Gospel Reading could not be more appropriate:-

"Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

Canon Andrew Tuck