

Sermon Notes from 10am service 30 January 2011

**Ezekiel 34, 1-16; Luke 16, 19-31**

### **Homelessness**

The readings today describe the gap between the secure and the vulnerable in society and the requirement of God that we care for vulnerable people. The word of the Lord through Ezekiel to the government of Israel said: 'You have not restored the weak, tended the sick, bandaged the injured, recovered the straggler or searched for the lost; you have driven them with ruthless severity.' The parable in Luke's gospel about the rich man and the beggar at his gate makes the same point: we are accountable to God for our use of resources and our care for people in our society who are vulnerable. The reference in Ezekiel to the straggler and the lost indicates that God is not concerned with the difference between the deserving and the undeserving, but only with their need. The passages also suggest that there is a direct connection between people who have too much and people who do not have the basics of life. Curiously enough, this is still true. We would have no problem in re-writing the words of Ezekiel and the parable of the rich man and beggar drawing examples from our own time. The rich man might live in a £130m penthouse at 1 Hyde Park, from where he can look down on rough sleepers in the doorways around Sloane Street. And the consequences of careless cuts are already treating vulnerable people with the ruthless severity described by Ezekiel. In Kingston we see an intention to withdraw support from people unable to live independently without it, and nationally there is a programme to force people on low incomes to move from the places where they live, and work, and have friends and family, to places which are cheaper because there are none of these things.

So far, I have spoken as if only people who are in some way vulnerable are threatened with nowhere to live. This is no longer true. Our young people, our children and our grandchildren now find they cannot buy homes, at least in places where they can find work, and they cannot rent them either. Many continue to live with their parents (which suits neither side!). Basically, the process which increased the value of owned houses over the last thirty years also forced rents up and has created almost

insurmountable problems for the next generation. A solution is not possible unless house owners agree some form of taxation on their houses to transfer some of the unearned gain back to subsidise rents and to build more homes. The prospects do not look good. Homeowners are in the majority and it would take a brave government to tax them. Meanwhile, home owners' main objective is to protect the value of their property and they commonly object to more homes being built near them, especially if those homes are for people on lower incomes. I have written a note to explain how this situation has arisen and this is available after the service.

On homelessness Sunday, it is appropriate to point out that housing is far and away the biggest driver of wealth inequality in the UK. To put it at its extreme, many home owners in London have assets worth more than a million, whereas a survey a few years ago showed that the average tenant in Glasgow did not have enough to pay for their own funeral. In these situations, we may feel individually contaminated, but what do we do, as individuals or as a church? First, we are part of the problem: we know that we are part of a pagan society which continually marginalises the poor and puts a higher value on profits than people. The danger for the Christian community is that we accept those pagan agendas and try to make them less oppressive. When this happens, the Church ceases to be the Church, and like 'salt which has lost its savour' it has no further use. It is seduced into softening the hardest edges of injustice rather than attacking its root causes. As a result, the Church then offers people not hope, but survival. It has ceased to be a prophetic body and has become the fifth emergency service – after fire, police, ambulance and road rescue. What we are really called to do is to challenge the pagan values of our society at their roots and seek to replace them with the vision and values of Christ.

- Having spent most of the last forty years involved in 'trying to soften the hardest edges of injustice', the last thing I would do is disparage programmes of direct help. Yet on its own it's not enough; it does not threaten in any way the oppressive systems which cause the problem. Oscar Romero, the South American Archbishop, said 'when I feed the poor I'm a hero, when I ask why they need to be fed, I'm a communist.' We have to act on a

number of different levels, so that our ministry follows the pattern of the ministry of Jesus – the disturbing, provocative, impracticable, loving and utterly God-centred Jesus. In addition to binding up wounds, we are called to take on ourselves the role of prophets and to allow our personal commitment to become professional and political.

In our church, we are already involved in binding up wounds, and in doing so we work with people outside the faith community who share our values. But we need also to be like the prophets in demanding that justice be put above greed and self interest. In the last analysis, people live by values, not by programmes of assistance, however desperately they may need them. Without vision, people simply perish. We need to offer hope. When I think of hope, I remember the words of Vaclav Havel, the Czech prime minister, who said that hope was a state of mind, not a state of the world; he said. “It’s not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.’ It’s this kind of hope which (Seamus Heaney) ‘enables us to grow beyond domestic privacy and social conformity and become witnesses for our society.’

In the political arena, we need to speak directly about values, about our hope for a society which values all people and distributes resources according to their needs. In the words of Paul in Romans 12, we should not seek to fit in to the climate of current opinion: ‘conform no longer to the pattern of this present world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good acceptable and perfect.’ We live in a society which is doing shameful things, and they need to be confronted with the values of the kingdom of God. We need to take every opportunity to challenge the values of our society, because the situation is difficult, but not hopeless. ‘We stand in the presence of God – the God who makes the dead live, and calls into being things that are not’ (Romans 4, 16). This means that ‘when hope seems hopeless,’ we live always by the faith that the power of God will use our weak efforts to bring about change.

