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Bank holidays and housing

I hope that you all enjoyed – in large parts of the UK – a typical wet, windy and cold early May bank holiday Monday yesterday!!

COVID-19 restrictions make such days even more ‘interesting’ than normal, don’t they?! I spent yesterday lunchtime wrapped up in winter coat, thermals and walking boots, huddled under a parasol with a friend on her vicarage drive, eating barbecue food cooked indoors, while her two children ate in the porch!

I know that the pandemic has made many of us acutely aware of the myriad things we take for granted under ‘normal’ circumstances, one of which is certainly the freedom to go into the homes of our friends, and to welcome others into our homes. But as Ben Aldous’ reflection today reminds us, across the UK there are thousands of individuals and families who, even without the complicating factor of COVID-19, don’t have access to safe, secure housing.

There was something genuinely quite fun about barbecue food in the cold and the wet yesterday, but it was only ‘quite fun’ because after an hour I could declare that I’d had enough, get into my car and put the heater on, and then step into my warm, dry house.

Whatever the weather over this next week, let’s take seriously Ben’s challenge to think about how we might respond to the issue of housing justice.

Go well!

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They will build houses and dwell in them

Bible reading: Isaiah 65:17-21

(The full lectionary reading includes vv22-25.)

‘See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight

and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

'Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.'

Reflection

As we slowly begin to emerge from lockdown hibernation and readily check our calendars to see what new experience, we can have this week (going into another person's home for a meal is less than two weeks away, people!) there is much talk of 'building back better' in the post-COVID-19 era.

There are vague political promises which include a greener future, a future that will see us tackling inequalities, a future dealing with the problems of around racial injustice, poverty, lack of social mobility, education, social care... The list goes on. Many of these promises could potentially have an impact on our rural areas. But they can feel just a political pipe dream.

I'm struck by the vision of future shalom that today's passage from Isaiah paints for us. Shalom in the Old Testament is more than just 'peace' as an absence of violence or cessation of war. It is a rich term which encompasses right living between God and people, and between people and people. It's a future vision of wholeness, joy, stewardship of the earth, distributive justice, good neighbourliness, genuine life-giving communities. Notice how the passage paints a picture of the absence of infant mortality and living a long life (v20), of living in your own home (v21), eating your own fruit (v21), seeing your children thrive (v23).

I wrote last year how the pandemic has functioned in an apocalyptic way, as a cracking open and revealing the way things really are in hearts and wider society. The vision from Isaiah is not just a pipe dream; it's a future hope that all of us who claim to follow Jesus can lean into. The coming Kingdom for which we pray every day through the Lord's Prayer has concrete outcomes. In the daily readings I use from commonprayer.net there is an oft used refrain:

'In our prayers and in our lives may your kingdom come.'

One way of seeing the kingdom come is living in homes that are safe and secure (v21). The recent *Coming Home* report, commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Housing Commission,

points out that more and more people do not have access to housing that is sustainable, safe, stable, sociable and satisfying.

COVID-19 has seen a shift in where people want to live. Newquay in Cornwall has been the most popular search on Rightmove over the last six months, with dramatic increases in house prices as people with bigger budgets mount bidding wars for certain properties. Increasingly, people (especially the young) in rural contexts may feel it's impossible to find stable and safe housing. In some rural locations, seasonal work, lack of transport infrastructure and other issues can leave people feeling like they are unseen and have limited options.

God is interested in every element of our lives. I've been deeply impressed by Keswick Churches Together who have worked tirelessly and thoughtfully over the years to create the Keswick Community Housing Trust which builds houses especially for local people at an affordable rent. I interviewed Bill Bewley, the chair of the trust, recently; he described the work as simply carrying out the basic command of Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for who you are and for giving us hope.
Help us not to forget that people are homeless every day across our nation.
Help us not to forget that many others live in poor quality, unsafe or short-term accommodation.
We pray for those sleeping under bridges, on park benches, in doorways or bus stations,
for those who can only find shelter for the night but must wander in the daytime,
for families broken because they could not afford to pay the rent,
for those who have no relatives or friends who can take them in,
for those who have no place to keep possessions,
for those who are afraid and feel hopeless.

For all people affected by homelessness,
for those unable to afford or access good quality accommodation,
for those who are being exploited by landlords or developers,
we pray that you will help us to provide shelter, security, comfort and hope.
Stir our hearts to share your love with our neighbours and the community,
and give us the wisdom to discern how we might meet their needs.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

(Adapted from housingjustice.org.uk/homeless-sunday-2020)

Response

As we come out of lockdown, perhaps you might consider how the issues of housing justice play out in your local context and what action you might be able to take.

How is your church, or churches in your area using their land, or other resources to bless those in the margins? Is this a question to bring up with your local vicar or minister, or at a church council meeting or through other governance structures?

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