

Dear Friends,

I wonder how many of us remember the great bank crash of 2008. For some this might seem like ancient history, for others it was just a blip. For some it was a significant reversal from which they have never recovered. There are people who the ill-informed might disregard as possessing some kind of privilege, yet whose existence is increasingly precarious with the prospect of another recession, which could yet prove far deeper than that of 2008.

Take for example Bibi Lynch. She is a successful journalist who is about to be made homeless. Through hard work she had been able to purchase her own London flat, without family help, by the time she was 35. However, new neighbours moved in after she had lived there happily for 5 years and a period of harassment followed. This coincided with the illness and death of her father. She felt she needed to get out, and so she sold up with the hope of buying another property. This sadly coincided with the 2008 recession. Work dried up. She was forced to live off her capital. For the next 10 years she had to sleep on friends' sofas and had to move 30 times. In recent times she has rented a rundown studio flat in Hove which the landlord is insisting on repossessing although eviction is not legal in the pandemic. In the meantime, her bank has 'pulled the rug from under her' by informing her that they had closed her account, thus affecting her credit rating. And so, an educated, successful 55-year-old woman again faces the prospect of homelessness.

The HM Government Housing Survey of 2018-9 reported 2 million adults "sofa surfing" whom they classed as "hidden homeless". One housing charity has predicted that homelessness will rise steeply due to the economic fallout of Covid-19. 2020 has been designated as a Year of Prayer by the Methodist Church. Here is one topic that greatly deserves our prayers. The problem is both so acute and also so chronic that it is beyond my own ability to offer solutions. That is a good starting place for prayer. Simply handing a problem over to God, not knowing how He might answer your prayer to bring comfort and resolution to an intractable problem. However, that is the great thing about prayer. I do not believe that God always expects us to come up with our own solutions. If He did, we would not call it prayer, we would call it life coaching!

When reading stories like that of Bibi, my mind searches my knowledge of Scripture to reflect theologically on the issues involved. Perhaps the obvious

story is that of the Good Samaritan. There was no compulsion to help, but the Samaritan's character and compassion were such that it was not really a matter of choice. For him, it was 'just what you do'. Without doubt, individual acts of kindness beyond the call of duty have transformed countless peoples' lives through the years.

Of course, there is an edgier and more challenging aspect to Scripture too. We find it, for example in the eighth century BC prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah of Jerusalem, and Micah. These remind us that although holiness must be personal it should also extend to the social and impact upon the ordering of society. And so people like Anthony Ashley Cooper, VII earl of Shaftesbury, commonly known as Lord Shaftesbury, was inspired by his evangelical Christian faith to expend his energy working to abolish child labour in mines, and improve the lot of people working in cotton mills, and to help the 'boot black boys' on the streets of London. He also worked for the reform of asylums. It has been said of him that he believed in both the salvation of the soul and the transformation of society. The number of charities that owe their existence to him is truly remarkable. At his funeral thousands of people lined the streets of London, such was the regard in which he was held.

So how should Christians offer help to the hidden homeless of today? Yes, by devoting ourselves to prayer, and by offering a helping hand, perhaps through our support of a reputable charity. Without doubt, we should offer them a faith to sustain them through their tribulations. But I am also left wondering, what are the structures of our society that are causing homelessness, and how do we go about changing them? I am afraid that is something I need to think and pray about. I invite you to do the same.

May God's grace sustain you throughout the coming week.

God bless you,

Keith

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