

Finding Our Home

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, Sept 18th, 2022 (Isaiah 58:6-9 & 1 Peter 4:7-11))

Sitting for the second day in the clothes I slept in, I have really been pondering what it must be like to be homeless. The Sudsy Challenge only requires that I wear the same clothes for three days, but I was not sure that was enough to help me identify with those who must be homeless, so I have also decided to not shower for three days as well, sorry about that and maybe it is best not to get too close.

Last night as I sat comfortably watching my team win their Preliminary final on the TV, I began to wonder what homeless people do with themselves once the sun goes down. We can watch TV, play CD's and listen to music, play computer games, do they have a radio or are they forced to sit with their own thoughts? Or do they roam the streets until it is time to try and sleep? As the rain began to fall, I was grateful to be inside but wondered how others fared on the street, could they find shelter? As the night got colder, I knew I could go to the cupboard and get a jumper or a rug and then put the heater on. How do those on the streets keep warm? Then in the middle of the night when I had to go to the loo (sorry middle aged woman problem), I knew I only had to take a few steps and I was in the ensuite, what to those on the street do? I knew if I spilt something on my clothes, I would have to wear them like that for the next few days, but what of the homeless, how long must they wear dirty and smelly clothing? I was able to spend last night crocheting as I watched TV, I really worry about how the homeless spend their evenings.

There are many reasons people find themselves homeless – domestic conflict, loss of a job, addictions, not being able to find accommodation they can afford, just released from gaol. And as we have recently seen both in this country and beyond, natural disasters like the floods in New South Wales can make you homeless, wars and conflict can make someone homeless.

As we, over recent months and earlier in 2019 have worked with the folk from Orange Sky I have learnt much about the homelessness from the people we met. Often marriage breakdown and the need to pay for their families meant people lived on the streets, tradies without enough work meant securing accommodation was difficult, a medical episode that lead to some violence forced another out of his home and being subject to intervention orders, others had been given one night in a motel after being released from gaol and then they were on their own, For some the streets are safer than being at home. The issue is complex and needs many different solutions.

What I also learnt and hopefully Ini and Donna will agree, that when one offered hospitality it was gratefully received, as people came and shared some home cooked food (something they rarely got), the barriers came down, stories were shared, people felt they belonged and would lounge around on the couches, would come into the office without knocking before taking their washing to the Orange Sky van. They educated us about life on the streets and where to get help. Their defenses started to break down and they accepted help. Community started to be built, and for our part it wasn't that hard – just

being there, serving some hot food and sharing conversations. A few others told me that they slept around the church because they felt safe.

God, we can see from our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning and from many other places expects us, the people of God or as the writer of the first letter of Peter puts it the household of God, is expected to do something about the homeless. Our ancestors in the faith found themselves in slavery in a strange land, in Egypt and then they were basically homeless as they wandered for 40 years. The church is supposed to take them in, to take care of them. Our role is not to judge but to care.

From the very beginning Jesus' housing situation was precarious. In a strange town his parents couldn't find any accommodation, so Jesus was born in an old stable at the back of some kindly innkeepers' property. Then he as a young child was forced to flee with his parents to escape tyranny, homeless once more. Then as an itinerant preacher he himself relied on the hospitality of others and reminded us that the Son of God had nowhere to lay his head.

The community to which the first letter of Peter is addressed, find themselves in a strange and hostile environment where they are treated with suspicion, slandered and resented. It is written to a group who did not feel at home, who felt like aliens, outsiders and second-class citizens. The writer offers them an image of what it means to be believers, it is to be part of the household, a household where all live together, all share, where people are at home. The idea of the household of God was part of the way in which the early church understood itself, as it met in small house churches. Feeling at home, sharing safe space and hospitality is part of the DNA of the church.

More than 116,000 people tonight in Australia will be homeless – they may be on the streets, they may be sleeping in their cars, they may be couch surfing, but they do not have a safe and permanent place to call home. Many more will be at risk of being homeless. Worldwide there are millions who are homeless, with no safe place to sleep.

We are the household of God, called to offer hospitality to those who do not have a safe place to stay, to offer welcome and dignity. Let's continue to find ways to do that here in this place. Amen.