



"In our Everlasting Father, we find a home that will not pass away, beyond the brokenness of this world."

How might you be able to act locally to support those experiencing homelessness this Christmas?

"I ain't going back to the streets"

I have been working in homeless services for over 15 years, and since March I have seen a real difference in services. From day one of lockdown we saw agencies across the sector really coming together. I was asked to help manage a hotel for people who have been rough-sleeping within the 'Everyone In' government programme. This was initially for 45 people with complex needs. We worked with the hotel, mental health services, substance misuse team, doctors, police, faith groups and charities.

This was an amazing time of relationship building and of seeing people's lives becoming more settled through being given a safe place to stay and being supported by people who care. I was very aware of God keeping me strong and peaceful during this busy time as I worked with our guests.

I can remember one of the guests said to me: "Lockdown saved me from life on the streets. It's just having that connection with people in the hotel. I ain't going back to the streets. I'm looking forward to the future in a place of my own".

- Eleanor manages a provision for people experiencing homelessness in Manchester, which is supported by the city's Methodist Central Hall.

For many, 2020 saw us spend more time at home than any year before. As jobs, social lives, and studies ground to a halt in the wake of coronavirus, the places we call home and the people we share them with have never been more important, or more immediate to us.

For people experiencing homelessness, this year too has been a diversion from the norm. In spring, the Government began providing temporary housing for around 5,400 people experiencing street homelessness, as well as families within the immigration system, as an emergency response to the pandemic. And yet whilst in the immediate term fewer people were forced to sleep on the streets over summer, the other shoe is yet to drop.

Homelessness is no less an issue now than it was before the crisis, and in all reality, it looks likely to worsen as the economic consequences of the pandemic begin to emerge.

As life begins to fit itself around this virus, responses to homelessness must adapt to the new normal. Practically, the playbook of church homelessness outreach no longer fits, as night shelters and the like are just not feasible this winter. Instead we, as the Church, face a new challenge. How can we provide hope and support for those without home this coronavirus Christmas?

In Isaiah 9:6, God's people are promised a leader who will be called '**Everlasting Father**'. In some ways, this name can be confusing. Most of us know Jesus as the Son to God's father. Yet in Him, a baby born into a stable and a man killed on a cross, we see lived out God's heart as father for His children. As Jesus himself says, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). His life provides us with a tangible vision of what having an Everlasting Father means.

Later on in the same book, Isaiah again writes about the coming King, Jesus. He says;

'The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power,

bringing with him the people he has rescued.

He will **take care** of his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs together

and **carry them** in his arms;

he will gently lead their mothers.'

Here we see a model of a father that rescues, not only spiritually, but practically. A father who gathers up His children, leads them forward, and literally carries them himself, when they cannot continue on their own. In Jesus, we meet this father in the flesh. He is a father that loves justice, urges us to stand for the oppressed (Isaiah 61:8), welcome the stranger and feed the hungry (Matt 25:45).

As we learn what kind of father God is to us through Jesus' life, we are invited into a family in which we too play a part. As brothers and sisters, we are called into God's redemptive plan to make all things new.

We are made part of a family that is led by a father that loves completely, and so are invited to love others just as he loves us. To love sacrificially, giving away what we have and carrying one another when we cannot go on alone. As Jesus demonstrates in His life, this is a love shown not only spiritual, but practically. As Jesus, did, we are called to seek out justice and to stand for the marginalised and oppressed.

And as Isaiah points out, in God we have a father who is everlasting. He is beyond this life, greater than the earthly struggles and daily trials, and yet chooses to be present in them anyway. In John 14, Jesus tells us that the father's house has many rooms, and that there is a place prepared for us there (John 14:2). God is not only our father in the now, but forever; His love for us is beyond our conception or limitation. In our everlasting father, we have a home that will not pass away, beyond the brokenness of this world. There is a hope beyond our current circumstances, beyond coronavirus and the trials that 2020 has brought.

This winter, as we reflect on the trials of this year and the times that God has carried us when we could not continue on our own, what would it mean for those without a home to know tangibly today an everlasting father who has prepared a place for them? How can we, as brothers and sisters in that family, follow Jesus' example to seek out justice and share with those in need?

Questions

- Where this year have you seen God as a father who has carried you in times of trouble?
- How might you/your church community be able to act locally to support those experiencing homelessness this Christmas?
- How might you be able to join calls nationally for housing justice this winter?

Prayer

Everlasting Father.

We thank you that in you we find family,

That you call us your sons and daughters,

And that you have prepared a place for each of us in your presence.

Gather up your children who are lost and hurting this winter,

Especially those who are without a home,

And carry them onwards.

Help us love one another as you have loved us,

And pursue justice for our brothers and sisters in need,

In the knowledge you are coming in power.

Amen.

Meg Read is one of JPIT's Parliamentary Interns. She is involved in JPIT's work on responding to homelessness.

