

Homelessness in Ireland

Father Peter McVerry SJ talks about what it is that we are all in great need of.

"This young man almost lost his life, not from lack of food, or the cold or an illness brought on by living on the streets. He almost lost his life because he had lost his dignity." -

A young man threw himself into the river, about two weeks ago. He was pulled out and brought to hospital. The hospital kept him in, as he was suffering from severe depression. This young man was homeless. Some nights he got a bed in a hostel, most nights the hostels were all full and he slept on the street. During the day, he walked the streets, bored, tired and hungry. While he was in hospital, I went to visit him. He told me: "I can't go on living like this anymore". "Living like what?" I said. "I can't go on living", he said, "knowing that nobody cares".

This young man almost lost his life, not from lack of food, or the cold or an illness brought on by living on the streets. He almost lost his life because he had lost his dignity.

He felt that his life was of no value to anyone, that he was worthless, that he wasn't worth caring about. He felt useless, that really whether he lived or died would make no difference to the world or to anyone in it. His sense of his own worth was so destroyed that whether he lived or died didn't even make any difference to himself.

After visiting him in hospital, I came away feeling that we, our society, all of us in it, including myself who had known him for many years, had failed him. Not only had we failed him, we had failed our God.

If the scriptures say anything to us, they tell us of a God who is our Parent, the Parent of every person who is and ever has been and ever is to come. I love praying that image, the image of a God who loves me with the infinite and unconditional love that only the God-Parent can have. I love sitting or kneeling in quiet, just enjoying the knowledge of the love of God, just being grateful.

Then I remember that God is not just my Parent, but the Parent of this young man and the Parent of all like him. They too are the beloved children of God, they too have this dignity of being the child of God and nothing can take this dignity away from them. To God, this young man was of infinite value, just as I am, this young man was worth caring about, this young man was so loveable. But we, God's followers, the Christian people of God, had failed God, because we had failed to communicate this to him, God's child. The one commandment that Jesus had left us, we had failed miserably, "Love one another as I have loved you". And God is the Parent who loves and cares for and cherishes those I find it hard to love, those I despise, those I can't stand,

those who frighten me or those who repulse me. And as I sit or kneel and am filled with the consolation of knowing that I am loved by God, my Parent, I am also filled with embarrassment at my failure to love some of those other children of God's.

Because I work with the homeless, I am often asked "Should I give money to someone begging on the streets?" I always answer, "I don't know". And then I add, "But always have a kind word for them".

You may know the story of the priest in London who was asked by a beggar for "a few pence for a cup of tea, Father." And the priest said to him, "You're from Tipperary." "How did you know, Father?" "Because my mother was from Tipperary and you have the same accent". And the two of them had a little chat about life in Tipperary. And when the priest was moving on, the beggar took out a handful of coins from his pocket, and said "These, Father, these are from those that don't care." That priest had given that man much more than money, he had respected his dignity, he had communicated to him what the Gospel is all about, the dignity of that man as a child of God.

I remember one day on my way to court with a young person, I noticed a man lying on the footpath. I wasn't sure if he was dead or alive. So I went over and shook him. He turned over and looked up at me. "Are you alright?" I said. "I am, sir", he said, "but thanks for asking." I did nothing for that man, but he felt that someone cared. And that made a difference.

In our hostels for homeless young people, I always say that what we are trying to do is to make each of those young people feel that they are just as valuable, just as loveable, just as worth caring about as any other young person of their age. If we are not communicating that, we may as well pack up and go home. Feeding them, clothing them, giving them a bed for the night is worthless if we are not giving them back their dignity. If we fail to feed them, to clothe them or give them a bed for the night, they will not die. They will manage somehow to get food on the streets, to clothe themselves, to find some little nook or cranny to sleep in. But they will not find dignity on the streets and that is what we have to give them. And if we fail to give them back their dignity, our failure could be their death.

We are building an extraordinarily successful economy. We keep getting told that we have never had it so good. We are told that there is no end in sight to this success. But if our success leaves some people feeling under-valued, feeling left out, feeling that they have no place in this project, feeling that the rest of us are so busy that we have no time or inclination to care for them, then we are building our house on sand. And that is how many people are feeling today. We have failed them and we have failed our God.

The only house that is worth building is the house in which there are many mansions, the house that has a place for all, that welcomes all, that cares for all, that respects the dignity of each and every one of God's children. The kind word, the reaching out, the caring is the cement that binds that house together. None of us can build that house. But each of us can place a few bricks somewhere in the walls.

no dignity
despair