

Out of Sight and Out of Mind?

by Chris Peacock

A huge amount of effort has gone into reducing the numbers of people sleeping rough in London's more visible thoroughfares and open spaces. Whilst one may question the accuracy of the official headcounts, everyone working on the streets agrees that there has been a dramatic reduction over the last fifteen years – from thousands to hundreds.

But much less effort has been put into reducing other, less visible, types of homelessness. Many people would be staggered to hear that there are over 130,000 homeless people in London, and nearly 400,000 across the UK. This is a national disgrace, and yet it is a statistic which is sinking slowly beneath a sea of indifference.

There are approximately 100,000 "hidden homeless" (people living in squats, or temporary housing, or sleeping on friends' or relatives' floors or in spare rooms) in London, and that figure has remained remarkably constant over the last fifteen years. Many of the people who have been so ostentatiously cleared from our streets have ended up in this dustbin category, many others are stuck in hostel rooms with little prospect of a place of their own, let alone a job, or friends, or a social life. Are they really "problem solved"? Or are they merely "problem buried"?

And what of the few hundred who stubbornly remain sleeping rough, often people who have a cocktail of problems borne out of years of trials and tribulations? When attempts to starve them off the streets by discouraging and discrediting voluntary tea runs (run at no cost to either national or local authorities) have failed, we see certain councils resorting to ever more draconian measures. Such as Westminster's plans to arrest people for begging, however

politely and quietly it is done. The implications for civil liberties are quite frightening, and yet the protests are so muted that you can scarcely hear them.

It may be uncomfortable listening for conservative middle-class Christians, but the Bible calls us to speak out in the face of such injustice. *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.*

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). Isaiah makes it clear that silence in the face of injustice is not an option (*"Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" Isaiah 1:17*). And that those who pass unjust laws will face a day of judgement (*"Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people...." Isaiah 10:1-2*).

We need to pray, individually and collectively, about what response God would have us make to attempts to coerce rough sleepers, to curtail centuries-old civil liberties, and to bury the facts about hundreds of thousands of homeless people.

In the meantime, ASLAN will remain one of the few experienced, reliable, and responsible tea runs going out onto the streets of London. We will continue to

work to help people off the streets, not by threats and coercion, but by love and kindness. And we will continue to work to keep people who have left the streets off the streets, by offering them friendship and advice. Above all, we will continue to pray for the light of God's love to break into lives darkened by pain and stifled by alcohol and/or drugs.

