

A plastic box containing one thing: a pair of dry socks. A road sign as a roof; sleeping bag hanging in a tree. As I jog, of a morning, around the Leg of Mutton field, just below the A14, there are now two makeshift camps that were never there before.

Rough sleeping, the visible evidence of thousands more cases of hidden homelessness, has doubled across England in the past six years. Every night now, an estimated 3,600 people doss down in doorways, recycling bins, sheds, and even under cars to shelter from the weather, and sometimes from a hostile public. It's doubled here in Suffolk too. There were 40 known rough sleepers last year; this year it's 80. The Bury Drop In centre supports up to 200 people regularly. Public funding for support services has declined; recent changes to the benefit system haven't helped. Homelessness leaves people desperate, vulnerable and without hope. It can affect people's physical and mental health so rebuilding their lives again is hard. This Advent, here at the Cathedral, we're focusing on how the Church responds to social need. Last week, Simon Snell was with us from Christian Aid with a stirring sermon about displaced people. Today I'm looking closer to home. To those who have no home.

Anticipate where you'll be this Christmas. Home will be central. Whether you're in your own, or staying at someone else's, there will be no place like home. Imagine what it must be like if home is a place of fear. Where too much drink makes your partner violent.

Imagine that you're in rented accommodation, and the landlord has terminated the contract and you've nowhere to go. Imagine home is a prison of social isolation and loneliness.

Advent: the time for hope when we take to heart the very beginning of the Christian faith, as a baby is born in a shed, far from home. Born in an insecure world, to make the world a better place. And because of that birth, Christianity has made an enormous impact through the ages, and today, to change things for the better. From the beginning faith meant action. It meant – and means – that we take our faith out of Church this morning and we respond to the need we see.

What do I see? Makeshift camps within yards of the A14. So what am I doing about it?

Well, on Friday night a few of us will be sleeping over, here in the Cathedral, and I'd like you to support me. Email me for the link, or google the website of the Church Urban Fund to donate towards the Advent Sleepover. It's easy enough. Or cash, or a cheque. Your contribution will make a real difference to homeless people and rough sleepers.

Advent is the right time to be thinking about how we respond, as the Christian Church, in a world that seems dark and fearful. It's crucial to consider our own fearfulness and anxieties. That we don't feel so overwhelmed that we hunker down into a sense of safety and cosy spirituality, but stay focused on the needs of those who are in greater need.

John the Baptist is in prison. The horizons have closed in on him. He is full of fear – the chances are he knows what will happen next. The prison walls, covered with brutality; his nostrils, filled with the stench of torture. And yet still he sends to ask about this cousin of his: Are you the messiah? And the answer will

have filled him with hope. 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.'

These two men sustain hope, a vision, that is bigger than fear – and so must we.

Our Christian faith is not worth much if it doesn't make a difference in the world.

David Bentley Hart, in his inspiring book *Atheist Delusions*, argues convincingly for the revolutionary impact that Christianity made on the classical world. In a world of almost every imaginable form of tyranny, injustice, moral depravity and sadistic cruelty, Christianity brought a different message. It brought the message of hope and kindness for the poor, the blind, the lame. Of love strong enough to raise the dead. We belong to a world-changing movement. We are a gospel people who do not accept hopelessness and despair, but who stand up and are counted for a better world.

When we have comfortable and loving homes, we don't tend to think of ourselves in prison. But there are any number of walls that hold us trapped. Prisons of complacency. Of apathy and self-centredness. Prisons of the soul and mind from which we are released by the light who comes into the world.

His immediate followers, the disciples, began with the people around them – just as Jesus had done. They cared for the poor. They fed the hungry. They visited prisoners. And in doing so, they brought about a renewal of humanity, a renewal of the world.

We live today in a world that can seem exhausted, that has lost its way. Our Christian faith teaches us compassion, love, service, presence and engagement. In quiet and careful ways, we come out of our prisons when we volunteer as Samaritans. When we offer some hours to the Bury Drop in Centre. When we pray. Contribute regular amounts to charity.

Here at the Cathedral we have recently renewed the peace and justice group and called it the 10:10 group. Why 10:10? Well, the Gospel of John Chapter 10 verse 10 has it that Jesus comes that people may have life in all abundance. So the 10:10 group is dedicated to any social action that encourages abundant life. If you're interested there will be an evening on 18 January at the Deanery to see how we can take ideas forward. You'll be very welcome. See Caroline Baker to hear more.

Because there is great need in the world. And we can do much. In response to the hope that Jesus brought to his own age, we can bring hope to this world too.

Abundant life. For all. Bringing down the prison walls, inspiring hope and joy. Keeping faith with those in need, just as God keeps faith with us. This is why we are here. This is our calling. The ancient calling of the God of love.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

To donate to the Sleepover visit:

<https://adventsleepout2016.everydayhero.com/uk/frankie>