

Week Three: Home

Ellie's Story

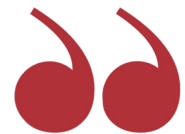


My name is Ellie and I've been homeless for a few months now. It's tough out here, and for a woman, it's dangerous too. For 15 years, I had a house, where I lived with my three children. Now, I get shelter where I can or sleep on the streets, and my children aren't with me anymore. My days are spent trying to get food and shelter. But you've got to keep on going.

The worst thing about being homeless is being cold and wet. At the Bristol Methodist Centre, I can get some dry clothes, have a shower and get my clothes washed. I can have some breakfast and lunch. They've given me a tent, a sleeping bag – they've given me everything I need. They are wonderful people. When I'm out there, I keep to myself. But in here, I feel safe. The centre is the place where I feel the safest.

I don't know what I'd do without them. There's a stigma attached to being homeless, but a lot of us are decent and intelligent people. I pray every morning, I don't hurt anyone and I keep trying to be a better person.

I want to say to people out there: give us a chance. Give us one minute of your time, just to say "Hi, how are you?" That's the best way you could help.



Ellie's story was first told in The Methodist Church Advent Offering. You can find it in full at www.methodist.org.uk/stories-bristol-methodist-centre.pdf.

Reflection

As of November 2018, 320,000 people were estimated to be homeless in Great Britain. This means that each evening, as the light begins to fade, families and people such as Ellie across the country are searching for safe, secure and affordable places to stay. For some, this means sleeping outside where space can be found. For many, this means unfamiliar rooms in B&Bs, bedsits, a friend's house or hostel.

As the story of Jesus birth unfolds in Luke 2, the light dims over Bethlehem and doors begin to shut, and we imagine a tired couple seeking somewhere to stay. The place is already unfamiliar – no home comforts, the familiar feel of the hallway rug underfoot as they step through the door. In fact, they find themselves with few options for comforts of any kind, as doors continue to be closed – full already, too expensive, too late.

A routine of closed doors and negative responses, they find themselves in the left over anywhere, behind the last resort. Whilst this scene is often warmed with low lighting and fresh hay in our school halls each year, the space must have seemed somewhat less welcome to its first guests, its setting offering little in the way of value or worth. Disappointment wouldn't have been an unexpected response. For the son of God, couldn't more have been offered?

The housing crisis in the UK is the public face of a much wider, deeper issue with our response to need. It is often the battleground for debates which lie at the heart of our political process. Where does the responsibility for provision lie: with the state, the individual, or the voluntary sector? In the meantime, the shortage of safe, affordable housing is leaving many repeating a routine of questions which is met with few answers.

For Ellie, this means the lack of dry clothing, warm food, and access to hygiene. It means the loss of safety. With the lack of these things, it is more than Ellie's security which is taken away, but her sense of relationship with others and her place in society. Ellie's appeal for those passing by to give her, and others, a chance exposes the bias of society, perhaps both conscious and subconscious, to remove access to dignity and value alongside access to home.

Repeatedly in the stories we've explored leading up to Jesus' birth, God's choices have exposed the people behind each action. As Mary is offered a voice, God brings her power to the fore. As the outsiders are invited in, God uncovers their worth hidden behind preconceptions and isolation. In each moment, God offers value. Woven in to the story of Jesus birth are displays of God's offer of dignity, worth and love.

Arriving to a place of rest which has the power to remove your feeling of safety is not a situation which translates any of these attitudes to action. Yet it is the situation our crisis of housing in the UK is placing many in. Response to the housing crisis in the UK needs to push deeper into questions not purely of numbers, but of values and best practice which sees home as more than an open door.

As we seek to respond to a crisis which leaves many without options, how could the role of the Church bring value back into the conversation? In Ellie's experience, the welcome of the Bristol Methodist Centre has given her the chance to find somewhere safe to rest. She has been able to ask for and receive support, without stigma or judgement.

We believe in a God who has a plan for each person, and longs to see them liberated to fulfil their potential. The choices we make as we seek to offer support to those trapped in homelessness hold the opportunity to bring this to life.

Questions for reflection

How could you show dignity, worth and love in all your interactions?

How might the church, both locally and nationally, respond to rising levels of homelessness in a way that upholds the value and dignity of all human life?

What opportunities are there in your community to be part of responding to the housing crisis?