

The Social Outcasts

Leprosy is a disease that still exists in parts of the developing world, although most people in Britain today would associate it with the middle ages and biblical times. Images of human beings living on the edge of society, ringing bells and crying out 'unclean' to warn passers by, are our popular misconceptions of Lepers today. While I know almost nothing about Leprosy, I do know a lot about homelessness, as I was a rough sleeper for over seven years and the way in which society treated me, at times made me feel like a Leper. Homelessness, like Leprosy is about living on the edge, as the homeless man or woman is often treated with contempt and marginalised by the rest of society. When I was homeless it didn't matter how clean and tidy I tried to keep myself, there was always something that made me stand out from the rest of the community and I often felt that this was probably the way that Lepers had felt in days gone by.

The homeless are a very visible presence on our streets and like the Lepers of the middle ages, they are unwanted and in some cases even hounded from town to town. That feeling of loneliness that you get as a homeless person as you crawl into your sleeping bag, on a cold winters night after having spent the day walking the streets, is one that I will never forget. I was a social outcast, a modern day Leper, as far as society was concerned, and as I laid awake feeling isolated, lost and abandoned, I still knew that there were people who were a lot worse off than myself. I used to thank God sometimes that I wasn't one of the starving millions in the developing world and that despite being homeless I knew that I wouldn't go hungry or without health care. The Lepers of old had none of these assurances and it was fortunate I thought to myself to be living in modern times, yet I still often felt like a Leper.

In fact the homeless share a lot in common with Lepers, as do other groups within society who for one reason or another feel excluded. Alcoholics, Drug users, Prostitutes, Beggars and the mentally ill are all groups of people who polite society tends to turn their noses up at, and like the homeless they are the social Lepers of our times. When the public see a group of homeless people congregating on a bench in the park or in the city centre, it is their vision of a Leper colony. One that few people want to go near and one which often causes fear and hostility. It is outrageous that we still live in a society that treats people this way and denies them any real hope. While there are many organisations and charities that do good work with the homeless, it is never anywhere near enough and a cup of tea and a sandwich are no substitute for a home and a normal life. Building understanding between the homeless and the rest of society is no easy task either, as people often have their minds made up about homelessness and homeless people, without knowing anything about the subject. The homeless themselves, are so destroyed by the experience of being rejected by society, that many never ever take their rightful place in it again.

Throwing money at the problem is a late response to something that shouldn't have happened in the first place, and once a person finds themselves homeless it often takes them years to get out of the situation. I have had my own council flat for over four years and yet there is still a degree of homelessness thinking to the way in which I conduct my life. After being homeless for over seven years I do not look at life in the way that I used to, and I am angry and bitter that I was ever forced into the situation, as forced I was, by a greedy manipulative capitalist system that had failed consistently for years to provide reasonably priced accomodation for ordinary people. I will never forget the first few nights that I spent on the streets, when as far as I was concerned, society had excluded me like many others, simply because we were economically poor. That is the worst thing about homelessness that so much of it is preventable.

The numbers of homeless people on our streets today, as well as the hidden homeless who sofa-surf on friends settees, is a powerful indictment of a society that can spend billions on illegal wars and pay footballers £100,000 per week for kicking a ball about. It is an affront to a persons dignity to let

them live in doorways or run down hostels where their self esteem nose dives even further. Society's failure to eradicate poverty is something that will reverberate in years to come, as more and more people are falling into the poverty trap and ending up homeless on the streets or in hostels, creating even more problems for the future.

Tony Blair's government must take it's fair share of the blame for continuing the policies of the Thatcher years, when council houses were sold off in the `right to buy' fiasco, which today has left us with a shortage of 50% of the council housing stock that we had in Britain 25 years ago. Coupled with the failure to build new homes, it has caused such wide spread social problems that it has affected the whole of society and not just the visible homeless. Today young families can't find anywhere to rent or to live and the failure of the politicians to do anything about this makes them unfit for office, as a future generation of disadvantaged people is silently growing up who will in the future put an added burden on the society that is neglecting their needs. As the founder and editor-in-chief of the Big Issue John Bird said to me when I interviewed him last year-

POVERTY IS EXPENSIVE, IT JUST DOESN'T MAKE ECONOMIC SENSE!

And how right he is. If this government fails to tackle poverty, which in my opinion it has then we are in for more Lepers on our streets and as they grow in number so will their ANGER!

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Originally written for the Willow Walker concert for Homelessness and Leprosy Sunday, 29th January 2007 at the Leper Chapel, Newmarket Rd, Cambridge