

## Celebrating the Presence of Christ – A Community Meal

One of the strands of our re-launched parish Development Action Plan which was unveiled at the Annual Parochial Church Meeting at the end of April, was actively to seek to develop and increase the ways in which we serve the wider community of St Neots, bringing Christ into the public square in deeds as well as words. Members of our church have been involved in the work of the Foodbank since its inception a few years ago. But over the past year and particularly during the unusually severe winter, we have become much more conscious of homelessness within our town, particularly the plight of the small but significant number of people sleeping rough, and in tents on the riverside and around the boundaries.

So far this year, representatives of some of the town's churches have met to try to consider how best to make use of our resources to help those who find themselves in this predicament. We've looked at a number of models, including the provision of a night-shelter. Although our present resources fall short of this level of provision, we are strongly of the opinion that regretting what we can't do, should not prevent us from doing as much as we can. One model that commended itself to us, is to offer a regular 'community meal' to which anyone can come. This would, for a couple of hours or so, create a 'safe space', a place of welcome and hospitality without discrimination, for people in whose lives such qualities are conspicuously absent.

Some months ago, I invited anyone who would be interested in helping to provide for the homeless to sign up to a list. I was very pleased to see nearly thirty names on that list, and some of us have met together to plan how this might take shape.

I'm very pleased therefore, to say that we will be putting on a Community Meal on a weekly basis, in the Church Rooms on Friday evenings, beginning on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> September. Although the fine detail is still to be worked out, we envisage a simple supper (say, soup and sandwiches) from 7 to 9pm. We think that it is very important that this should be a true and authentic community celebration. One of the distressing consequences of poverty in general and homelessness in particular is a loss of human dignity. For us as Christians, this loss represents a grave desecration of the image of God in which every person is created. A homeless man who called at my door some months ago was continuously asking 'Why do people hate me? Why am I treated like dirt? Why do they want me to go away?' This is sadly commonplace. It is unfair and unjust. That is why we want to welcome each participant unconditionally, and honour the presence of Christ that they bring into our midst. We do not want to be (or to be seen as) dispensers of charity to the 'deserving poor', but to offer an unconditional welcome to our fellow

human beings, and to sit down and eat with them. It is important therefore, to make sure that each Community Meal is a place where community can be created and celebrated, a place where even if just for a couple of hours, everyone can feel that they belong. This it seems to me has the potential to become a true expression of incarnational ministry, uncovering the presence of Christ that is latent in every gathering, in every person. Society at large looks at a homeless or needy person as a 'problem' to be solved, or a buck to be passed. We just see an individual in distress and in need of help, encouragement and friendship.

In the same way that the services of the Foodbank are a practical outworking of our Christian vocation, but expressly exclude any form of direct evangelizing, there will be no hidden or limiting agendas in our work. We will offer welcome and friendship, practical help where we can or signposts to where it can be found, assistance with the impenetrable forms and barriers of officialdom. The whole time, we will of course take due regard of safeguarding regulations and rigorously protect our own and each other's personal safety.

There are lots of details to work out: how will we provide the food and drink? What training do we need? How do we let those who need or would benefit from the Community Meal, know about it? And no doubt there are many more. These are matters that we will be thinking and praying about over the summer.

I do hope that you will agree with me that this is not just a worthwhile project to be starting, but an exciting and energising opportunity to build a different kind of church community, a 'fresh expression of church' through community, creating community for those whom society at large would rather not see.

At the most basic level, the Community Meal will provide a brief oasis in the vast desert of people's lives. But by the grace of the Holy Spirit, perhaps it will be something much more. If you feel that this is something you would like to be involved with, please let me know. But I ask everyone to pray that in this, as we have prayed in the days leading up to Pentecost ... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven.

Jesus said: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25.40)

Yours ever in Christ

Fr Paul