

Caught up in circumstances

As the Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness I spend huge amounts of my time simply talking to people - people from all parts of the Highlands, people with a wide variety of lifestyles. What I nearly always discover are people who are trying to do the best they can for themselves and for those around them. I meet families struggling to cope with change and people trying to work out a way forward. I am frequently reminded of those times in my own life when difficulties seemed insurmountable, when the system seemed almost designed to keep me down.

All of this is balanced by my preparations for the coming festive season; I have all the expected things to get ready - sermons, talks, services, people to write to; while also encouraging those I serve to engage in helping others who are struggling. All of this takes place in a house surrounded by an ever increasing number of Christmas cards, and I suspect that because I am "the Bishop" most of mine show the scene of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. In rather romantic images I am surrounded by the representation of a needy family who were kept out in the shed because no one would find them room. We have a great time celebrating the birth but often fail to see the irony of a struggling family caught up in circumstances beyond their control, the same circumstances that are faced by so many families at this time of cutbacks and recession.

Many poorer families have been adversely hit by changes in the Welfare provisions; this is especially true of those families who are working at the lower end of the wage scale. The lack of availability of low cost housing, especially in our rural communities, coupled with the increases in the basics of life make things even harder. Here in Central Inverness the statistics tell us that 29% of children are living in poverty - that means they are living in households whose income is 60% less than the average wage; those are families who will struggle to get through Christmas. I am meeting more and more people who are dependent on the excellent work of local charities for food, clothing and heating costs, I meet young people desperate to work but who cannot afford the fuel to get to the places of employment and most worrying of all I am increasingly aware of a growing divide between our communities fostered by ill-informed reporting which talks of Scroungers and Layabouts.

During the early eighties my wife and I found ourselves both homeless and wage-less, we fell through a hole in the welfare provision and I know how difficult it is to pull yourself back out. The people who often made all the difference were those who actually bothered to talk to us, to treat us as equals and to trust us. Those that hurt most were those who condemned us without knowing us. So this year as we send our cards and put up our decorations we should remember the circumstances of the birth we celebrate and do something to find room in our communities for those struggling to get through the door and into the warmth.

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