

NO PLACE TO CALL THEIR OWN

Economic downturns have most impact on those who are poorly paid or on benefits. **Susan Smith** outlines her experience in Northland and reflects on how the gospel nativity stories of the homeless Mary and Joseph are similar to the situation of many families in her region.

In recent years I've been involved with many families in Northland struggling to make ends meet. We have around 160,000 people living in Northland — that is, north of the Brynderwyn hills. Thirty per cent are Māori. In ten years time almost 25 per cent of the population will be 65 years and over and children under 14 years will be only 19.6 per cent of the total. Most disturbingly, while 20 per cent of New Zealand's population is in the lowest quintile of the deprivation index, the equivalent measure for Northland is 35 per cent. Northland's statistics can be discouraging!

Education and contacts count

I remember talking with a Mercy sister shortly after Vatican II. She and three other Sisters had made an "option for the poor", leaving their prestigious schools and positions and moving into a poor suburb. She said that while their material situation had changed dramatically when they moved to live among the poor, they still had their experience. They could not empty their heads of the knowledge, skills and contacts that educational opportunities and

respect and status in the church had meant for them. That knowledge and those important contacts could not be divested as easily as material well-being or support.

I often think of her words in my work with people in need of emergency housing here in the north.

What can I say to a man, partner and father, who has just been made redundant because China is no longer buying the quantities of logs that dominate the port scene at Whangarei? Redundancy has meant his wages drop from around \$1,000 per week to a job-seeker's benefit, a government derived income, of just over \$300 a week. His partner receives around the same amount and together with two children they must survive on around \$700 a week — of which \$350 goes on rent.

What do I say to a solo dad looking after seven children?

To the young man just out from Ngawha prison with nowhere to stay?

What do I say to the young mother who has sought out emergency housing because of violence at home?

It concerns me that these men and women who are economically and politically disenfranchised have so little control over their lives.

Pay too low

Many seeking emergency housing are employed. A University of Otago report in 2013 showed that 49 per cent of all those in inadequate housing situations were working — but usually in poorly paid jobs. And economic downturns always impact first on those workers who are poorly paid.

It concerns me that these men and women who are economically and politically disenfranchised have so little control over their lives.

They are victims of circumstances all too often beyond their control. When their income is low, even something that seems relatively minor to others may be just enough to overturn their financial management — the tyre blows out, a bad toothache, the washing machine breaks down, the school wants \$75 for a child's school trip. Such events might have nuisance value for a middle class family. For those lowly paid or unemployed, such occurrences can represent disaster. They can result in the family showing up at emergency housing centres around the country. And a family experiencing fear, embarrassment, anger, anxiety, powerlessness, vulnerability and loneliness.

Mary and Joseph homeless

Earlier this year *Tui Motu* published some articles on housing in New Zealand. I won't repeat the statistics in those articles but I want to look at what the lack of adequate accommodation at a stressful time might have meant for Joseph, a young carpenter of Nazareth and his pregnant wife, Mary.

There is nothing in either Matthew's or Luke's gospel about the birth of Jesus that mentions a donkey. So Mary and Joseph in Luke's gospel may well have been walking to Bethlehem (or in Matthew's gospel walking to Egypt).

Mary's situation is analogous to that of the expectant mothers and mothers with young children fleeing vicious civil war and worse in their countries today.

Probably, as a safety precaution, the couple were travelling as part of a group to ensure protection from robbers. Were they worrying about finding suitable accommodation at night?

Was Mary anxious that she'd give birth in Samaria, given the long-standing enmity that existed between Samaritans and Jews?

Would they be in time to be



counted in the census? If they were late would they be penalised? Was Joseph still feeling embarrassed, angry or upset about the early conception of the child?

Would they experience loneliness and alienation? What would it have been like when they arrived to find they were competing for available accommodation?

Forced to move

I wonder if the dominant emotions were vulnerability and powerlessness. Mary and Joseph were probably quite happy among their extended family in Nazareth. Some New Testament scholars suggest that Joseph may have worked as a builder at Sepphoris/Tzipori, some six kilometres north-west of Nazareth. There the small town was growing into an important city in Galilee.

The Roman Emperor Augustus's command to register in Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, would have upset their lives. They had to obey. Imperial authorities were ruthless and to disobey would have invited all sorts of trouble. But travelling also created problems. Joseph may have worried about being able to support Mary and the baby when they returned to Nazareth.

Would there be support for his wife in Bethlehem? The canonical gospels are curiously silent on these matters, unlike the apocryphal gospels that may overwhelm us with detail.

Having no control

I suspect that Mary and Joseph had much in common with people feeling vulnerable and powerless, arriving at emergency housing providers.

It is not the young mother's fault that her partner has beaten her up and she has had to flee to an emergency housing refuge. Nor is it the fault of the young dad earning about \$25 per hour, who loses his job and finds that he can't pay \$350 per week in rent. He, his partner and two young children are likely to show up at an emergency housing centre.

Luke's gospel tells us that Mary "gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in the bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn". As current refugee crises demonstrate, today we live in a country and in a world, where there are millions who cannot find "a room at the inn".

Christmas is a time for families to celebrate their togetherness but sadly it is also a time where many find there is not enough safe accommodation for them in our country and in our world.

Maybe like the Magi in Matthew's gospel, who brought gifts to the newly born child, we are called to bring gifts to the poor in our midst, to the ones for whom there is "no room in the inn". ■



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