

Grassroots Ministry: Presence to Self & Others

Ali Roach rsm (ISMAPNG)

Mercy is more than charity: it not only bestows benefits but receives us anew, and pardons again and again even the most ungrateful.

—Catherine McAuley

In my ministry I remember these words of Catherine. With 200 people a day going through my workplace, a day centre for homeless persons where fights go on all around you, it can be easy to ignore the chaos when it goes on all day long.

Homelessness is cruel; it kills people, and rarely makes the news. Children are born into it and they can never know their mothers. The biggest cause of homelessness is sexual abuse from childhood, then drugs and alcohol, lack of housing, family violence and lack of education. Our [Newstart allowance](#) can barely pay the rent, let alone electricity and gas. If Catherine McAuley were here today I am sure another House of Mercy for homeless women and children would be opened – they were her people.

I am often thanked by my clients in the kindest of ways by flowers picked from the local park, a call out from the clients the parking inspector is on his way, a hug, a door held open, a joke, a compliment on my hair cut (even if I haven't had a cut), but most importantly, sharing the tears of happiness when housed.

All of this could not be possible if in my role I was not truly present and listening to my client's story and needs. Each client has a story, needs, heartache and hope for the future. If I am not truly present in my role I would not truly listen and I would be placing my client on the revolving door of homelessness– not setting them free. It can take a long time, a lot of resources but we can get there!

All of my clients have carried the Cross of Christ...

First Station: Jesus is condemned to death

No Alcohol or drug service can take Suzie because she requires hospitalization for Detox . Suzie consumes 6 litres a day. Drinking will kill her. Suzie has been consuming alcohol since her mentally ill son began raping her and destroying her marriage, home and career,

Suzie, like Jesus, believes in God and believes in a better place but Suzie's suffering has condemned her to not want to live and only want to fog out her days with alcohol.

My time with Suzie includes transport, referrals and preparing her to live another day.

Second Station: Jesus takes up His cross

“Mr Happy” packs up his belongings, as if it were a cross, every day, and walks with his heavy baggage without assistance. He owns no phone and has no access to Centrelink or transport.

“Mr Happy” still grieves for a family lost. His petty crimes, such as loitering, are often the cause of short-term imprisonment so we can never get to accommodate him or make plans beyond gaining him his Identification. His grief plus his addiction are an enormous cross to carry.

Third Station: Jesus falls the first time

Tammy falls the first time after being released from prison as an amputee into my program. I can only put her up in a motel for a few nights as all the refuges are full. Tammy is waiting for her prosthesis leg. Tammy and I were assured in prison that her script for methadone would be available at the local pharmacy. It is not. The pharmacist at the prison will not take our call. Tammy then finds heroin to stop the withdrawals, overdoses and is rushed to hospital.

Fourth Station: Jesus meets his sorrowful mother

Eddie is due for his Housing Authority Meeting. Eddie’s mother asks to speak to me about how she can no longer take Eddie’s screaming in the house. I explain the effects of schizophrenia and his medication but she and her neighbours can’t have him live there anymore. I apply to a rooming house where he is accepted but he refuses to stay at it and after one week Eddie goes missing. I have to place him on the Police’s Missing Persons List.

Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his cross

James is pleading with the centre staff for a place to rest his guitar case, belongings and family photos. “No” say the staff, “It’s closing time. You’ll have to carry your belongings with you.” James cries, “Please I have nowhere to leave them!” Simon, a client, appears with a Coles trolley, “Here you go mate, pop them in here...and remember to hang to it”.

Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Rodney appears at the centre with blood through his beard as well as vomit. There seems to be a big cut. Staff *and* clients look away. Rodney isn’t talking...it’s not his way.... until the face of the nurse appears with a warm cloth, stitches and bandage. The Nurse is able to hear the story of Rodney’s pain without even asking a question.

Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time

Suzie is discharged from hospital proud of an opportunity to shower and dress. She continues drinking her 4-litre cask port wine and wears high heel stilettoes that she found in the city’s Salvos shop. Later in the day Suzie falls in the city with people stepping over and around her. She is just drunk, a homeless woman with no respect. It is clear she was wearing no underwear, when colleagues and I see her and check she is breathing. We call an ambulance to add to her already outstanding ambulance bills. Suzie, fortunately *this time* is admitted to hospital.

Eighth Station: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

Sleeping rough in the cold and wet down in one of Perth's squares, Danielle meets a homeless team. They actually stop and listen to her. Danielle talks about her concerns that normally people look away from her due to her drug abuse. However, this evening a woman doctor from the homeless team acts differently towards Danielle. The GP seems to understand what Danielle is talking about and asks questions that Danielle can answer. The GP said she worked at a clinic. She believes that if Danielle had some time she could get her own room at the hospital, just for a few nights where she could talk about Danielle's concerns further. Thanks to Danielle meeting this woman doctor, she was able to go to hospital for treatment after four long years of homelessness.

Ninth Station: Jesus falls a third time

Emma came out of Detox, so proud she's had two months to dry out and was ready for rehab. However, Rehab had not come to pick her up from the hospital as planned. So Emma came to the day centre to ring. We helped her ring Rehab. It had been pre-arranged for Emma to be picked up on the day of discharge but Rehab explained there was a double booking and that Emma would be in by Friday. I argued the point that Emma was *homeless* adding to pressures on keeping her sober. Surely things could be reviewed. No luck. I then reminded the service it was their responsibility as she needed her full pay for rehab so they should put her up in a motel. No Luck once again. *They said if she is really ready she can wait.* My workplace paid for accommodation for the few nights but the loneliness, plus being let down by failed promises, lack of schedule and the ease by which she was able to purchase alcohol, had Emma back on the wine within 18 hours. Emma was now, after two months, no longer eligible for rehab!

Tenth Station: Jesus' clothes are taken away

Madeleine wakes up by the entrance door of the day centre. Her trolley, bags and all other belongings are gone. As staff arrived to open the centre for the day she is *screaming*. Madeleine is my client. I assure her we have plenty of clothes, we can get her more clothes. But her children's photos are gone, her purse is gone. I assure her I can get her a Medicare and Health Care Card by midday. None of the help I offer can calm her. Her own belongings have been taken. A homeless woman's life has been stolen whilst she slept. Madeleine later told me that is why she takes methamphetamine at night....to stay awake.

Eleventh Station: Jesus is nailed to the cross

Patty can no longer wait for his next hit of methamphetamine. He tries to be admitted to the city's major hospital where he is discharged, his mind is tortured by psychosis. Patty is homeless. No doctors' appointments are available. Patty stands on Rail Way Bridge and falls, hitting electrical wires, electrocuting himself on his way down to the hard railway lines. Whilst I know Patty's story, on the evening news it is just a quick news story that stating homeless man jumps from Railway Bridge is rushed to the local Hospital.

Twelfth Station: Jesus dies on the cross

Enid is bashed to death senselessly, after being brutally raped, by six men. Her skull is crushed as she lies defenceless in a park. Enid is a woman who stood up for others, be they client or staff. Enid stood up for me. Enid had once had a life; she had been a registered nurse. However, the disease of alcoholism robbed her life and soul and left her without the ability to make choices. I believe the moment Enid died she was free. She became an angel at peace wrapped in the arms of God experiencing no more suffering.

Thirteenth Station: The body of Jesus is taken down from the cross

I was sitting with a client, Louise, who was dying of cirrhosis of the liver, alcoholism and past heroin addiction. She was crippled by schizophrenia paranoia and PTSD. I had been by her hospital bed every day for 4 weeks but this morning as I arrived at 7am her breathing was slow and shallow. Yet she looked at peace. I moisturised her hands and then she began her Cheyne-Stokes breathing. I panicked and called a nurse who reassured me she was comfortable but had begun her final road home. To begin with, I recited Hail Marys, Our Fathers and Salve Reginas and then I just stroked her hand told her how much I loved her and that when she gets to heaven God will throw his arms around her and never let her go.

A moment after she died I was looking out of the window over a garden, her face appeared in the window, smiling, non-bloated, her jaundice had gone – she was free.

Fourteenth Station: Jesus is laid in the tomb

Jesus is laid in a tomb, it was owned by a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph. Similar to today, the downcast and rejected the poor can be supported and saved by the wealthy without us ever knowing.

I am privileged to walk amongst the homeless and disadvantaged. Whilst draining, I only have to remind myself Jesus is there.

When Jesus died, he died for our sins. Our sins that wound the mentally ill and exclude persons suffering addictions. Jesus consoles persons suffering rape, sexual abuse and family violence. Jesus gives his life for the perpetrators, just as he does for those that have never been shown compassion.

Jesus suffers with the homeless, with their life of rejection and grief, their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, their disabilities and abuse. Jesus shudders that in a rich country like ours, the homeless are turned away despite suffering PTSD, Hep C, HIV, and Psychosis, infections, dual addictions, kidney and liver disease. Like the homeless, Jesus was afflicted with community violence and rejection just as today's homeless persons are.

Jesus weeps for the homeless, who are shown little respect or compassion by community and Government, just as Christ was when he walked this earth... I remind myself each day that I am looking into the face of Jesus Christ.