

## Remember the Poor: Berhampore Community Ministry

Rev Bruce Hamill – for St Ronan's 18 April 2018

Galatians 2:1-10 Matthew 25:31-40

Last time I was in Eastbourne I mentioned my work in Berhampore as Community Minister for Island Bay Presbyterian, but I didn't really go into it. The request was made that I come back again and say a bit more. So here I am. Thanks for your interest. It's good to be back.

There's an important verse in Galatians that we just read. It comes in the middle of Paul's struggle with the Jerusalem Christians. It's a fascinating story, because in the background is the first big issue for the church – the *catholicity* of Israel (small c, universal). What does that mean?

There was a strong strand of thought, at least within the prophetic movement within Israel that believed that Israel was a 'universal' nation, a nation for the healing of the world by God. They were a nation of priests, through whom God would heal the world.

The big question was: How? By the time of Jesus, as my friend Sameer Yadav puts it, "it was more blueprint than building". Paul

represents the way the call of Israel moves from blueprint to action by the establishment of a community of the kingdom which is a community of *all nations*. Paul is challenged by the Christians back in Judea, Peter and James, and they meet to discuss. In the end they accept Paul's vision and vocation, but they have one key proviso, "that he remember the poor". This is not just an incidental postscript. Oh, by the way, while you're at it, don't forget the poor. It's more like, Whatever you do, remember the poor! This is their common ground. At the heart of their sense of God's mission for both Paul and the church of Jerusalem was the priority of the poor.

What you have done, said Jesus, to the least of these in my family, you have done to me. They knew that. It was the common consensus, taken for granted by the church of the first 300 years. That was their revolution in the Greco-Roman world. It was not just compassion. It was a *witness*, a declaration in the habits and practices of the nature of God and of the world. They worshipped a God who remembered the poor. And they did so as a community of people who were predominantly themselves poor – their own material survival was also touch and go.

And the Roman world saw that different way. They didn't understand it. They couldn't go to church and learn about it... because non-Christians were not admitted to Christian worship. But they saw people living together differently and reaching out to others differently. They saw not through words but through the lives of the Christians a vision of a different God and a different world. What Jesus did was he radicalised that Jewish sense of the priority of the poor and he lived out the risky cost of it. And to be a Christian... to be the church... meant learning to share life with the poor. That's what God does. That's what Jesus did. That's the Christian life.

I selected these verses to introduce the Berhampore ministry today, because in a way they are the basis for it. These are the scriptures I had been reading as I reflected on my own calling and ministry ... and when I saw that IBPC wanted not just to have a community minister, but to reach out as a whole congregation in a way that called them into relation to 'the last, the least and the lost' in their neighbouring suburb, in particular in the tenement flats of Berhampore, it was like a kind of a-ha moment.

I had been working as a normal Presbyterian minister in Dunedin and had increasingly found myself working on the interface

between the church and the wider community... but for all sorts of reasons it was becoming a difficult struggle. Powerful members of my congregation simply didn't share the vision I outlined before. And I was at the point of giving up. So, when I saw the job description it was like... too good to be true. My dream job, the thing God had been leading me towards for several years now

And the bonus was that the job was half time. In my journey into becoming a Christian at the time I realised that a key part of it for me is a kind of *detoxification* from the culture of capitalism, from the love of money. I needed to earn less. As you know ministers are paid too much.... I jumped at an opportunity for half-time work. Why be time-poor when you can work half-time and have a go at managing on less.

"Don't forget to remember the poor." At face value that sounds easy. But how? The more seriously you take it the harder it is in practice. It's certainly not a matter of throwing money at people and problems... it's very easy for charity to be toxic. How, then? What does *good* charity look like?

So, I came to Berhampore with a lot of questions and a lot of ideas to test out. I came above all else to learn to be a Christian and to learn with the people of IBPC.

I spent the first three or four months in discernment. Looking, praying, walking around, meeting people. The motto, pray before you leap. The parish set me up with a wonderful group of key people to provide a support team and a team for leadership and planning. One of them works at the coal face with the homeless for DCM, one of them is our minister's wife, my own wife is on the team and fourth has recently returned from several years living in the slums of Manila in the Philippines as part of Servants. It's an amazing group of wise women ... and me.

Our key focus early on became the Council Flats nearest to our Congregation, on the south end of Berhampore – Granville Flats, one of the roughest complexes, badly in need of upgrading. So, I turned up there for the Council chat session with residents and very quickly got to know folk. The Council was surprisingly welcoming. Quite soon they gave me a key to the Community Room and encouraged me in supporting the Granville Community.

Early on I got to know a guy who was struggling with anxiety issues and he asked if I could help him by driving him to the Supermarket once a week to help overcome particular anxieties. I did this and from this became aware in quite a practical way of the details of poverty. It's not easy to live on \$30, sometimes \$20 dollars a week of groceries if you're medicating your anxiety with \$65 worth of smokes a week – zero discretionary income left.

Our team decided that food and relationships would be a focus of what we do – they go together better than love and marriage. So at the beginning of 2017 we started two simultaneous ventures with teams from the congregation. One team of about 5 folk organised and supported a free lunch every Tuesday in the Granville Community Room. Their focus was building friendships with residents. Members of the congregation make soup and quietly stack it in our church freezer (BGI – amazing coincidence)

Another team of five or six are involved with bringing a Fruit and Veggie Coop to Berhampore. Tuesdays are really busy. The folk go over in the morning to St Aidan's Miramar and pack the Fruit and Veges. I then turn up with a van (borrowed from some parishioners) and pick up the produce for Berhampore. Meanwhile back at Granville flats we set up for lunch. So, by

about midday there is a bunch of Granville residents and a group of Island Bay Presbyterians having lunch together and other people arriving at the Community Room to pick up their Fruit and Vege orders. Sometimes it is a bit crazy.

The Fruit and Vege Coop provides affordable produce (1/2 price of supermarkets), fresh on the day, which folk can pick up without driving to supermarket. It also provides me with a connection to the other Tenement Flats of Berhampore. I go from Granville Flats to Centennial Flats to Rintoul Flats on the Tuesday, getting to know a wide spectrum of the Community.

That's Tuesday. On Mondays I use my precious key to open up the Community Room (show poster) put on a cuppa and chat with people in groups or individually. This has opened up enormous pastoral opportunities for me and deepened friendships. Here I hear many stories, often tragic stories. We talk about everything from: why the lift doesn't work, to robbing banks, to smokes and how to get them, to the book of Revelation.

One of the projects I have started is setting up a fund with donations from the congregation, in order to give out grants so people can buy the e-cigarette/vape apparatus to make a

transition away from smoking. Even if they don't quit, it means less than a quarter of the cost!

If you haven't realised by now... the key issue for me about charity not becoming toxic is friendship. Not just any friendship. The deeper the friendship, the greater the honesty the more genuine the help can be and the more it is mutual help. Christian charity is first of all an act of witness ... witness to the incarnation, God's love in human flesh. Which is to say it is itself 'incarnational'. What you must give is yourself. It can't be done from a comfortable distance.

When we first arrived in Wellington I read an article by Adi Leason (Waihopai 3) who lived with his family in Granville flats in the 1990s. It was fascinating. So, we rang him up and went out to visit to ask about Granville. He has since become a good friend. But that evening we talked of our experience. And he listened. And then said. So, what you need to do is move in to Granville. My wife said, but what about Beano? (our dog, you can have dogs in council flats) Adi didn't hesitate. I've got a gun. I'll shoot it.

From that point on Jan and Adi's relationship has improved (it would have to). But it really highlighted for us the importance of

being with people as much as possible... and the problems of the do-gooder white guy coming in from a comfortable life. We don't qualify to live there and haven't shifted in. But we have recently brought a small apartment up the road and will shift there early next year.

Several events over the time now have reminded me of the deep suspicion (often justified) of someone like me that can often lie just below the surface. However, thank God, the deeper and overarching experience has been one of growing trust, of seeing community life strengthen. Sometimes I'm a bit like Red in Shawshank Redemption, the guy who can get things. Sometimes I'm the "go to guy" for conflict resolution... like when drug deals go wrong, or tempers flare up.

The other thing that has been a highlight of our work in Granville has been working with Kaibosh (food waste people). Another team of 4 congregation members are on a roster to deliver free food every Saturday evening. This is when we see the most number of residents out together. It is deeply appreciated. And the team get to know more of the residents.

At the end of 2017 we felt as a leadership group that it was important to go deeper rather than spread ourselves thinner... to take seriously that this is spiritual calling not just social service provision. So, we started a process of being intentional as a team in Berhampore about our discipleship. We use a system called 3DM to disciple one another.

Five of us meet as a group over breakfast on Wednesday morning. It's a bible study, and it's not a fellowship group for sharing ideas or feelings – it's more practical. Each week we discern together what God might have been saying to each one of us and hold each other accountable for what we do in response to that. (check out 3DM online). I feel it's often the missing link between Sunday worship and mission.

I'm really excited about this process. Not only is it exciting learning with others to pay attention to what God is doing and how God is nudging us along. I also see these team members as leaders who with 3DM will have the skills to disciple others and hopefully continuing the mission of our congregation in Berhampore long after my contract comes to an end.

So that's the Berhampore Project. I love it and find it full of surprises and learning. But it is not a quick thing. It's something we are in for the long haul. Because it's mission and not just social service, it's costly at a personal level, slow and relational - long haul. We are not dealing with clients, we are dealing with friends. So if you remember please pray for us from across the harbour.