

## Toward a theology of home

By Victor Doughty, Lt. Colonel –

“The Way Out” initiative, calling Salvationists to double The Salvation Army’s impact on homelessness in this territory, provides an opportunity to revisit some of the theological underpinnings of our social work in this key aspect of our ministry.

The concept of *home* in Scripture takes us back to our first parents living in the Garden of Eden; a place of physical shelter and protection, a place of emotional safety and security, a place of spiritual fellowship and refreshment. In short, the perfect home. Our departure from Eden launched homeless humanity on its current course, desperately searching for a way out of our present condition and a way back to that perfect home.



Home, by its very nature, foreshadows heaven. “Yet,” according to John Tweedale of Ligonier Ministries, “for many, the home is far from heaven. It is hell on earth. For those suffering in the environs of oppression, home is a cauldron of abuse, violence and manipulation. It is a prison to escape from, not a refuge to run to. This side of heaven, home should be a place where faith, hope and love flourish. Faith in the sure work of Christ crucified and resurrected. Hope in the power of the Gospel to overcome the world...And love for a triune God whose glory and beauty knows no end.”

We are familiar with the poignant words of Jesus when he responds to a teacher of the law: “*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*” (Matt. 8:20). Jessica Brown, author of “The Grace to be Human,” commenting on this passage, wonders if “the longing evident in Jesus’ honest cry is one reason why the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 rings with such frightening poignancy. Those who claim to have known Jesus are cast out into the darkness. Why? Because they did not look after those who were thirsty, hungry, sick and in prison—those who...have a weakened if not depleted capacity for keeping house.”

Does the personal experience of Jesus, one familiar with what it’s like to be without a home, help to explain the fate of those who fail to look after their neighbors in need? If so, it would certainly be consistent with the Old Testament where, according to Brown, “we encounter a God who has a deep soft spot for those on the margins, the outsiders, and those like the widow and the orphan who experience difficulty looking after themselves: those whose capacity for homemaking is threatened in various ways.”

As Salvationists, we view homelessness as a multi-faceted reality with physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. For us, the perfect home is with God. In the words of the Psalmist: “*Lord, You have always been our refuge. Our ancestors made you their home long ago*”

” (Ps. 90:1, The Voice).

The beautiful song by Ivy Mawby, “In the Love of Jesus,” presents *home* as a spiritual place, the place to which the wandering child returns, a clear reference to the parable of the Prodigal Son recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

*Like to a child who, when the night may fall,*

*Out of the darkness hears his father call,*

*Far and away though his feet may roam,*

*Sees in the distance shining lights of home.*

And so the concept of homelessness, the sense of being lost and displaced extends far beyond those lacking physical shelter or emotional safety and security.

The ultimate goal of our services to the homeless must not be simply the provision of shelter or even housing, but home. *Home*, not only as a physical place or an emotional state of mind but a deeply spiritual reality that transforms the heart and every aspect of the human experience.

May God bless those engaged in our life-changing ministries to the homeless. May we each do our part in reaching out to our homeless neighbors in need, addressing their physical and emotional concerns while inviting them to respond to the call of God and welcoming them to their new spiritual home.