

Reflection on Sunday 25 May 2025

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Reading: Acts 3. 3-10

Enjoy being surprised

Sometimes, the opposite happens to what you expect.

I was walking down the road one day on my way to Farringdon station in London. It was a few years ago; I was commuting at the time and was heading home after work. It had been a tough day, and I was feeling a bit stressed.

As I approached the station, I could see what I instantly recognised as one of London's 12,000 rough sleepers. I don't know them all personally but there was this guy sitting by the Evening Standard paper rack, a young man in his 30s with a grubby blanket draped over his shoulders. He had a polystyrene cup on the pavement in front of him.

I'm sure you've seen that image a hundred times. You know what's coming. As I got closer, sure enough, the man stretched out his arm and opened his hand.

Surprisingly, in his hand were a few coins. He looked up at me, smiled, and said: *Hey mate, would you like some loose change; you could buy a cup of tea with that.*

I stopped dead in my tracks and I burst out laughing. I said, "*That is the funniest thing I've heard all day, if not this week*". I laughed again and I gave him £20 because he had cheered my day one hundred percent by acting in completely the opposite way to what I had expected. It was funny and refreshing and it cheered me up and my £20 probably gave him a bed for the night and something to eat. It was definitely a better way to end the day.

I saw him the next day in the same place and he laughed when he recognised me, and we had a chat. I've worked for Crisis in the past, the charity for the homeless, and I know that every rough sleeper has a story that is more complex than you might imagine.

Over the following year, I got to know my rough sleeper friend. His name was Liam. He had moved to London from the West Country and had a steady job until he got mugged at knife point on the street and stabbed in the thigh. He spent several weeks in hospital and never really recovered. His mental health was badly affected and he lost his job and his accommodation and ended up sleeping on the street. I gave him money regularly but, more than that, I spoke to him with what I hoped was interest and compassion; we sometimes went for a coffee and talked about his life, my life; stuff that friends talk about.

When Christmas came, I gave him money for a bus ticket to Exeter, where he reconnected with his brother. And that seemed to be a turning point. When we met up in the New Year, he had resumed his begging pitch by Farringdon Station, but now he was getting paid to make sure the piles of Evening Standard newspapers were not

blowing about in the wind. He was on the start to slowly rebuilding his life.

Soon after, he was allocated a one-room flat by Westminster Council. With an address, he was able to claim some benefits. He told me that he had enrolled on a charity-funded stained-glass art course at St Martin's College, and he was saving to buy a guitar. I don't take any credit for the improvement in his life but, just maybe, our first joke together kick started something that made Liam begin walking, leaping and, who knows (?), praising God.

Sadly, we lost touch with each other when COVID changed the world, and I stopped commuting and the streets of London emptied. But I thought of him the other day when I read this morning's First Lesson. Peter and John meet a beggar at the temple gate in Jerusalem. In a funny sort of way, their encounter is like the story of Forbes and Liam at the gates of Farringdon Station.

In the Bible story in Acts, it is the beggar who experiences the complete opposite to what he's expecting. He asks for money but what he receives is something far greater. Peter famously declares: *I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give to you; in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk.*

I didn't say that to Liam when I first met him, and it was Liam who surprised me by offering me money. But I like to think that the casual, easy-going friendship that developed, where I gave him respect and we laughed together, helped him begin to get back the life that he had lost.

In the story from Acts, Peter and John's meeting with the beggar is a significant moment because it illustrates a shift from material charity to spiritual transformation. While almsgiving was a common and expected practice in Jewish tradition, Peter's response elevates the encounter to an act of divine intervention. The man is healed, not through money, but through the power of Jesus, through positive communication and the faith that Peter has in the man's ability to get up and start walking – walking, leaping and praising God.

In the Bible, the word beggar only appears 12 times, mostly in the Gospels and each time closely associated with Jesus. There's the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16. 19-31), for example, which illustrates the consequences of ignoring the needs of the poor. There's the blind beggar Bartimaeus (Mark 10. 46-52) who is healed by Jesus, demonstrating Christ's concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of those in need.

But beggars in the Bible represent much more than people on the street with nowhere to live; they represent all the world's needy, marginalised, underprivileged people. The word 'poor' as a description for someone appears 276 times in the Bible, which highlights God's concern for the needy.

The passage from Acts also reminds us of God's power to restore, renew and bring life where there was once despair. It prompts us to remember that God delights in all people; that all people, even the beggar at the gates of the Temple and the beggar at the entrance to Farringdon Station, are loved by God – loved, valued, precious and, as believers in God's values, we should regard all people in the same way. Beneath the needy exterior, poor people (we shouldn't really use that term these days), low-income people, are often talented,

gifted, capable, powerful, wise and redeemed in Christ in exactly the same way that we are.

Peter and John didn't give their beggar money, but they gave him healing. This suggests that the most transformative gifts aren't always material, but are favours that address deeper needs – loneliness, emptiness, desperation.

Peter teaches us that, while giving money to the poor is good, offering love, dignity, and hope can be even more powerful. It calls Christians to give to the poor and needy, not just materially, but holistically, offering concern and compassion and love to bring transformation.

Prayer

Lord, you say
that to truly love you
we must also
love our neighbours,
which can be difficult
when there's a gulf between
our circumstances and theirs
our lifestyles
our riches.

So, teach us to love, Lord,
without boundaries
as you love us.

Only then will this world be
a better neighbourhood
in which to live and share.

Amen

Acts 3. 3-10

Peter Heals a Lame Beggar

A lame man, crippled since birth, saw Peter and John about to go into the temple and he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognised him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.