

**A theological reflection on why we undertake ‘Filling the Gap’**

When considering the initiative, **‘Filling the Gap’**, it is important to reflect on the theological reasons for undertaking this type of ministry. What follows provides suggestions of relevant scriptures to study as you consider and pray about how your church might respond:

During the Covid pandemic, Marcus Rashford, The Manchester United footballer, was appalled when he heard that the Government was refusing to give vouchers during the summer holidays to the 1.3 million children who received free school meals in term time. The thought of children possibly going hungry horrified him and he knew that something had to be done. Consequently, he raised the profile of the issue to such an extent that he secured a change in Government policy and families received vouchers. As people of faith, many of us are also shocked when we think of people struggling to cope, whether that is to make ends meet, to manage debt, to address loneliness and isolation or to face mental health issues and a lack of well-being. We want to help those who are suffering and out of compassion, we offer hospitality, using a wide variety of practices.

For Christians, hospitality is a way of showing God’s welcome and it is an important theme found in both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament reminds us that because God showed great care in delivering his people from slavery in Egypt, we should show hospitality to strangers, widows and orphans (e.g. Leviticus 19. 33-34; Deuteronomy 12.17-19; 24.19-22).

The New Testament gives frequent accounts of Jesus offering or receiving hospitality and his actions and parables affirm the place of welcome, particularly for those who are struggling or are on the margins of society. In the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25. 31-45), Jesus reminds us that when we feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger, it is, in fact, him that we are feeding, providing with a drink, and welcoming. Jesus suffers alongside anyone who is suffering and, when we reach out to meet a sufferer’s needs, we meet Jesus and offer him our help too.

Jesus also makes it clear that both children and the poor are at the heart of the Kingdom of God. He explains that children are people of importance to God (Matthew 18:1-6) and he teaches that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor and that we can only enter into it when we become like children.

By his attitude and actions, Jesus also makes it clear that the practice of hospitality is something he wants others to engage in. This is seen, for example, at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan, who has shown hospitality to the man who fell among thieves, is identified as neighbour and Jesus says to the lawyer, ‘Go and do likewise’ (Luke 10.37). It is a significant message for the church about the way it relates to its neighbour.

It is important to note that Jesus was never afraid to be controversial and when he cited the examples already given, he was being ‘counter cultural’, frequently challenging the religious, social, political and economic establishments of his day. The poor were viewed as a nuisance and children were chattels and servants and occasionally a commodity to be used and abused.

We need to ask the honest question about whether or not our society is any different. The poor, the homeless, the unemployed are often seen as a sector of our society which we can ignore or who are simply a nuisance on our streets and a drain on our economy, but Jesus reminds us that they are our responsibility and when we serve them with dignity and generosity we are serving him.

In the Feeding of the 5000, the only miracle, other than the Resurrection, recorded in all four gospels, the disciples asked Jesus to send the people home, as, after a long day, they were all tired and hungry. But, Jesus’ answer was, “You feed them”. All they had to feed the massive crowd was the picnic brought by one young boy and the task seemed impossible but they had their instruction, “You feed them”. Following Jesus’ instruction, they did as they were told. They then witnessed the miracle!

When we volunteer to run a *Filling the gap* initiative, we are, in fact, following Jesus’ instruction as the disciples did. We aren’t waiting until we have enough, we aren’t waiting until State provision catches up or the Local Authority provides free school meals in the holidays. We are urging churches to do what they can, with what they have, NOW. Furthermore, many are following that call.

What does it mean to recognise my neighbour as a gift from God? It is through our neighbour that we hear God’s calling to be in relationship and not to be so self-absorbed and it is through our neighbour that we learn the art of generosity, and doing life together. The New Testament says when we do that, we find God to be both in the neighbour who we assist (Matthew 25:40) and in the bond of love this generates (1 John 4:12). We are also called to develop relationships of mutual generosity. In doing so, our human relationships reflect the life of God, in whose communion there is both equality and difference.

Our prayer is that all communities who confess Christ are called to love their neighbour and serve the poor with a generosity that is borne out of a desire to bring God’s Kingdom to everyone.