

Affordable Rural Housing

In the Bible, the right of the individual to be given shelter is part of God's plan and intention for human beings. It is written into Israel's religious understanding of hospitality that those who find themselves without shelter must be offered it. People who find themselves without a roof over their heads, whether through poverty, destitution, becoming outcast, travelling, or otherwise astray, must be taken in and cared for. In this sense, the understanding of the Bible is of a community which extends hospitality and care to all around, even to strangers and aliens. It is not a matter of a 'right' to a house, or to certain sorts of property, but the right to shelter and human company as essential to human dignity and social harmony. So it is that the story of the birth of Jesus, for example, carries a resonance which we probably no longer really appreciate. Jesus is born outside the warmth and companionship of his fellows. His parents are rejected and almost (but not quite) cast out. He is born on the very edge of the community's life, so the question thereafter, as now, is 'who will take him in?'



This matter of who takes Jesus in, is very important throughout the gospels. Jesus is given shelter and offered hospitality by all kinds of people. For example, we see him coming to Zacchaeus's house (much to others' disgust) and we see him staying with Martha and Mary. These are people whose housing and hosting Jesus provides the context for life-changing and life-

affirming experiences. As in the Temple, God dwells among them. In other places Jesus is not so welcome; the same hospitality is not afforded. That rejection works both ways (compare Matthew 10. 12-15). Ultimately Jesus ends up where he began, on the margins, the outside. He is crucified outside in the open air, beyond the city walls, naked and suffering, - a picture, then, of everything God does *not* want for human beings.

To be Christian is to take Jesus in: 'I stand at the door and knock' (Revelation 3.20). The image is significant. We have a choice, to open the door, to offer our house and hospitality, or to ignore the knock, close the curtains, turn up the TV. And this is not a private matter of offering Jesus the spare room and charging him rent, for Jesus makes it clear that with the offer of salvation comes responsibility. Any person needing help and shelter needs our response, needs our efforts to give them a purposeful life and human dignity. How we work to that end directly shadows our relationship with Jesus (Matthew 25. 34-46). And it matters, because we all want ultimately a share of that final house we cannot afford, in the shelter of God's everlasting arms. We want that confident, praise-giving cry of the end of the 23rd psalm: 'I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'.