

The social reality of Christmas

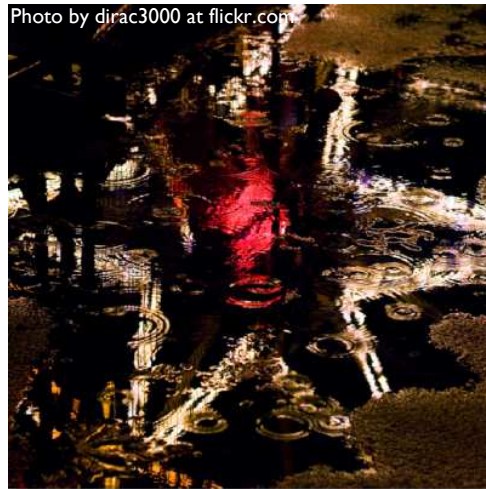
The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain

The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain addresses the needs of the many vulnerable and isolated Irish emigrants in the UK, with particular emphasis on Irish older people, Irish Travellers and Irish prisoners through a range of frontline services. Outreach workers from the charity describe how the more vulnerable members of Irish society often experience Christmas and how they understand the importance of what they do, particularly at this time of year.

A Travelling Family's Christmas

This year, the image depicted on our Christmas cards here at the Irish Chaplaincy shows the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. The image of a young mother, child in arms, sitting on the back of a donkey with her husband walking by her side, resonates strongly with me and the Irish Traveller community that I work with. Irish Travellers, up until relatively recent times, travelled by way of horse-drawn wagons. Growing up in rural Ireland they were a regular sight on the highways and byways: always moving from place to place, seeking an appropriate place to stop and pitch camp. Two different groups, the Holy Family and the community of Irish Travellers, are brought together in the image of a means of transport.

However, it is here that the parallel will stop for most. For the majority of us, in the image of the Holy Family we see a family travelling to seek refuge in a foreign land, driven from their home by a murderous king seeking total power and control. Yet the similar image of a Traveller family on the move may be seen through eyes tarnished by prejudice and perhaps even racism. They are a family invading someone else's space, abusing the system, perhaps running from the law and generally up to no good. Travellers are among the most marginalised and socially excluded comm-



unities in Britain today. They are often hounded from place to place, welcomed nowhere. They are seen by many as a second-class, criminal sub-culture who must be forced to change, to settle and to conform. In the eyes of many, there is simply no place for Travellers, no room for those who are different, and so no welcome is extended to the wanderers.

It is in this prevalent climate of prejudice that many Traveller families seek to go about their daily lives, eking out a living, raising their children, trying to provide for them a shelter and security amidst the hostility of the wider community. For many Travellers living on the side of the road, with no proper legal pitch to call home, this Christmas they will wait: not with joyful expectation for the coming of the Christ child, but hesitantly and anxiously for the knock of the local council official accompanied by the police, who will deliver not a message of goodwill but a notice of eviction. That family will have to take flight not into a foreign land but into another unwelcoming town. I will spend time in the coming weeks going out to meet and be with many such families, bringing with me the help and support that the chaplaincy can offer. It will be little, but it will be greatly welcomed by these families who, despite being unwelcome everywhere, are themselves the most kind, welcoming and 'faith filled' that I have ever worked amongst.

As a Church community, we are challenged to see both families, the Holy Family and the Traveller family, through the same eyes: the eyes of Christ. We are challenged to respond to the needs of all, irrespective of which ethnic group they hail from, no matter where it is they seek to go and no matter how it is that they got to where they are, whether it was by means of the discomfort of the donkey's back or the comfort of the modern motor caravan. The needs of all are to be responded to and met in love and service. As a chaplain to Traveller families, for me that is what Christmas is all about.

(Fr Joe Browne, Traveller Project Manager)

A Prisoner's Christmas

I will spend Christmas morning in the Welsh town of Abergavenny, surrounded by my wife and her family and friends. If previous years are anything to go by, we can expect a beautiful, crisp day with the opportunity to take a stroll in some idyllic countryside before a long and lively lunch. I know that I am very fortunate to be celebrating Christmas in this way, but despite all of the attractions that south Wales holds there is one thing it isn't, and that is home. For despite the comfort and cheer that I'm lucky enough to have, there is one thing that I can be absolutely certain of: I will be missing home and wondering what family and friends are doing back in County Armagh.

So if someone like me, in the midst of loved ones and plenty, feels the pang of homesickness, you can only imagine how any of the 800-plus Irish prisoners in UK jails, not to mention the Irish prisoners in 22 countries around the world, are feeling on Christmas morning. Last week I received a phone call from a prisoner, John, who is currently in jail on the east coast of England. He was arrested in Dover trying to smuggle cigarettes into the UK so he is serving his prison sentence in the UK, but apart from that he has no family and no connections in this country. He is in regular contact with his brother, Mark, but he was last able to visit in May due to the cost of travel and overnight accommodation, and his own work and family commitments: it's not an easy journey to make

from the west coast of Ireland. John will spend this Christmas alone, in prison, far away from his home, family and friends. The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) sends out cards and presents to John and all of the prisoners that we have contact with. The presents are not fancily wrapped and placed under any tree; they are normally phone cards, the price of a packet of cigarettes or some reading material to get them through the miserable, lonely and long winter nights. Our staff and volunteers will continue to visit Irish prisoners in places as far apart as Durham and the Isle of Wight in the next few weeks, providing pastoral and emotional support as well as sorting out the practicalities of dealing with a prison system that is increasingly complex. Some of our staff and volunteers will spend Christmas morning at Mass with prisoners, including many from the Travelling community for whom faith is so important, particularly at this time of year.

As well as the prisoners themselves, we have also been helping their families travel from Ireland to see their loved ones before Christmas. The assistance we provide ranges from financial support to arranging access for visits with prison authorities. Can you imagine the contrast at Irish airports, between the joyous and thankful parents waiting for their children to arrive home for Christmas from all over the world, and the anxious families of prisoners who are flying out to a remote part of England? The latter will probably be travelling for the best part of a day, knowing that they face being searched by prison officers and having presents confiscated, for a snatched one-hour visit with their son, brother, father, daughter, sister or mother, in a room with maybe fifty other people.

I understand that it is natural for some people to be sceptical about working with prisoners. After all, they say, prisoners are in jail for a reason; they have committed the crime, now they must do the time. But the story doesn't end there, not for the prisoners or their families. We shouldn't forget that Jesus was held prisoner, and that he too was an emigrant. So this Christmas when we think of the Holy Family, I would also encourage you to remember prisoners and their families in your thoughts and prayers as well.

(Conor McGinn, ICPO Project Manager)

An Older Person's Christmas

Last Christmas, it was just me and my thoughts. I got so lonely that I'd have done anything for a bit of company. That's why I rang 999 and ended up in A and E. I complained of chest pains, though the pain was more here [touches his heart]. It just felt better to see someone, anyone, than to be alone in that flat.

(Sean, Older Irish Person, South London)

As Christmas approaches, it is often all too easy to get caught up in the rush around us to get everything we need, or are supposed to need, before Christmas Day arrives. Yet for those older people like Sean who live alone and can't get out much, or have few if any family and friends for support, this build up to Christmas can be very hard indeed. They stoically face the prospect of being by themselves over the Christmas period with only memories of better Christmases past for company.

The Irish Chaplaincy's Older Person's Project supports and cares for these older Irish people who may not only find themselves alone at Christmas, but throughout the rest of the year too. We care for the most vulnerable and isolated older Irish people in London, by providing a culturally sensitive visiting service that reaches out to them in their homes, as well as in care homes and in hospitals, offering emotional, spiritual and practical support, irrespective of their beliefs or attitude to the Church. Our small staff team of four and our network of volunteer befrienders respond to referrals from statutory agencies and local parishes, as well as from individuals themselves who request the support of the project.

Last week I visited Eileen, who lives alone in North London. Eileen has poor health and separated from her husband many years ago, she does not get out much and will have few Christmas cards and presents this year. She will be alone this Christmas Day, as she is for most of the year. I am one of the only visitors Eileen will see this December, and as she told me as I was leaving, 'It's great to get a visit in the afternoon, it breaks the silence of here'. I left her a chaplaincy Christmas card and a Christmas cake, baked by one of our volunteers. A small reminder that we have not forgotten her this Christmas time.

Our mission is always to 'journey in hope' with our older people, assuring them that they are valued and important and that their lives still have worth and meaning. We travel alongside them, whatever their circumstances, nurturing and encouraging them as we go, and listening to and valuing their life stories.

On occasions people ask us to pray with them, or share with us their beliefs as well as doubts about their faith and their relationship with God. This is always a privilege and a humbling experience as people explain something of their journey of faith. We try to work closely with local parishes and religious orders in providing spiritual and sacramental support to older Irish people and have found this to be an important way to reconnect people with parish and community life. As Tommy told me, 'most of the Irish friends I made when I worked in London have moved on or are dead now. My last link with them was the few Irish men I saw at Mass. But since the old legs don't work so well now, I don't even see those now. I don't feel part of Irish community anymore.'

As well as visiting older people and building up relationships with them, our work often includes rebuilding contact between an older person and their relatives and friends back in Ireland, sometimes after decades of separation. Sean, who we heard from earlier, was reconnected with his family back in Co. Fermanagh after a 25-year gap in communication. We helped resettle him back in a care home in his native town this summer and with family close by he'll have no need of emergency services for company this Christmas time.

(Paul Raymond, Older Person's Project Manager)

For more information about the Irish Chaplaincy and about an idea for a gift that will also support the Irish Chaplaincy's work with vulnerable people, please see: www.irishchaplaincy.org.uk