

Scripture: John 21: 15-19

IN THE NAME OF GOD, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

What a pleasure it is for Margaret and me to join you this evening and as Moderator, it is a privilege to bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Although there is a well-established programme of visits, during their year of office each Moderator has the opportunity to highlight some of their own interests.

And during my year of office I have chosen to highlight the continuing scandal of homelessness in Scotland.

As you know, the Christmas story tells of Jesus being born in a stable – because there was no room at the inn.

So when a group of Edinburgh's church leaders wondered how the churches might celebrate the Millennium – 2000 years since the birth of Jesus – we asked people who were homeless, people for whom there was still no room at the inn, what if anything they might like the church to do for them.

So it was that in 1999 the charity Fresh Start was born, a charity which helps people to make a home for themselves.

Sunday by Sunday in congregations all over Edinburgh, as well as their Bible and hymn books, people bring cleaning items, pots and pans, crockery, duvets and towels to church.

After the service these items are gathered and then taken down to a warehouse in the north of the city to be sorted into Starter Packs.

The warehouse is the headquarters of Fresh Start, a charity which helps people make a home for themselves.

During the week teams of volunteers make up a variety of Starter Packs.

Alice was one of the people to receive a Starter Pack of cleaning products as well as a pack of toiletries, soap, shampoo and body lotion, all items left behind by holidaymakers in one of Edinburgh's hotels.

What a difference it made to Alice.

If the Starter Pack gave her the chance to clean her flat, being able to use sweet smelling shampoo, shower gel and body lotion was an unexpected luxury, and Alice said it made her feel good about herself and helped restore her self esteem and dignity.

Week by week hit squads of volunteers also go out armed with paint, paintbrushes and wallpaper to help someone decorate their flat.

Maria was one of the hit squad clients.

Maria couldn't believe people would volunteer their time for her and for nothing in return other than the privilege and pleasure of helping her turn her flat into her home.

It was like a beautiful dream she said, they were like angels who just came and went out of nowhere.

Angels indeed: angels in painting clothes who helped a young woman who felt worthless find value in herself and in others.

I have never been homeless but one of the things I have learned is that for most people being homeless is a stage in their life, a very difficult stage, but with the appropriate help and support most people are able to get back on their feet and make a fresh start in life.

Duncan is one of Fresh Start's staff members and when Duncan took the Fresh Start vehicles to be serviced little did he know the surprise that awaited him.

The vehicles were duly serviced but when the invoice appeared in the Fresh Start office, it was evident a mistake had been made.

The garage had charged for parts but no charge had been made for labour.

When Duncan called into the garage to ask for a new invoice, he was met by the mechanic.

It transpired several years previously the mechanic had been one of the people Fresh Start had supported.

The man now had his own home and, having completed his apprenticeship as a mechanic, he was running his own business.

However, he had not forgotten that at a very difficult time in his life, people had been there to support him.

I can't afford not to charge for parts,' the mechanic told Duncan, but as long as you bring your vehicles here, the labour is my gift.'

Another lesson I have learned is that homelessness is not just about bricks and mortar and a roof over someone's head; it usually involves a break-down in a wider and far more complex network of relationships.

Helping people find the confidence to start trusting again, especially if someone has been badly hurt or let down, is not always easy but it is one of the keys to a fresh start in life.

And as the story of Peter confirms, the trust which gives birth to a fresh start in life lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

Peter was one of Jesus closest disciples but Peter had lied and denied Jesus.

Peter had broken the promises he made to Jesus, he had let himself and his best friend down, and his tears were bitter tears of regret.

Yet when Jesus caught up with Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus didn't hold it against Peter.

Such was Jesus' trust in Peter, Jesus asked if Peter still loved him – and when Peter replied that he did still love Jesus, Jesus gave him the chance to pick up the threads of life again and be a disciple once more.

Peter's story takes us to the heart of our faith.

No matter the promises we have broken, no matter the hurt we have caused, no matter the bitter tears we have cried having let ourselves and someone we love down, having died on Calvary's cross and risen to new life on Easter dawn, Jesus does not hold any of it against us.

Instead Jesus wants to know if we still love him – and if we do then like Peter his promise is to give each and every one of us a fresh start in life.