

Cold, Wet and Penniless in Leeds

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This is a true story about two people who were sent to a city for 24 hours by their lecturer, with only an envelope containing two return train tickets. They weren't told where they were going, were given no provisions and had nowhere to stay. They had to rely on their faith in God and the generosity of strangers.

One of those people was me. It was part of a module I was studying called Mission and Evangelism, and the other lucky volunteer was my course mate Simon Grundy, who is training to be a priest. We are both studying Theology, Ministry and Mission at Cranmer Hall, Durham University. It was said that we were prayerfully chosen, but we think we were picked for being two of the few 'locals' at Cranmer, both being born and bred in the north East, and therefore would be well suited to the harsh weather conditions we faced. Simon considered wearing just a t-shirt as it was only November, but in the end we both went for jackets.

We opened the envelope and saw we were headed for Leeds and wondered what was in store for us. We had been given one bit of advice, "Find out what God's doing and join in". That was our mission. We were essentially to share something of God's love and Jesus' mission with the people we met in Leeds. We tried to steer clear of planning too much ourselves in case our own desires crowded out the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. So with excitement, curiosity and a fair amount of bewilderment, we stepped off the train at Leeds at 7pm into an almighty downpour, and looked at each other and thought, 'Well this is it.'

The full story of what happened in those 24 hours, including being turned away three times from a homeless shelter, the many attempts to find suitable benches, and a very disturbing encounter with an aggressive man on drugs in McDonald's can soon be found via this link to my personal blog site: frontlinefaithfulblog.wordpress.com What follows here is just one story of what happened on the mission.

The most profound and surprising thing we experienced on our mission in Leeds was the generosity of strangers. We had no food with us¹ and had both eaten our last meal at lunchtime. It was now the evening and we had no guarantee that we'd eat again until the following night. If we were going to eat or drink at all in between, we'd have to trust God and the generosity of strangers.

One of the first places we felt called, was to a bar in the centre of Leeds. Partly because it was raining torrentially, and partly because it was opposite the Catholic cathedral where we had just said a few shivery prayers and so was in our line of sight. Inside, whilst Simon ordered us two glasses of water, I spotted a middle-aged lady sitting on her own at a table of four. Rather than asking if I could take

¹ We were given £50 'danger money' that we could use in the most extreme of circumstances. Such circumstances were not explained so we decided from the start to act as though we didn't have it at all.

the chairs if they were free, I asked if I could sit at her table. A bold move as Brits like their personal space, but if we were going to get anywhere in the coming 24 hours we were going to have to step out of our comfort zones. She obliged and told me she was waiting for her husband. We got into a conversation and soon enough she asked what I was doing in Leeds. I told her that my story would sound strange, but would tell her if she wished. As I was telling her about our Christian mission and our situation, Simon and the lady's husband returned. We got on to talking about religion, how we each came to faith, and the things we had given up to follow that faith (Simon's well paid career in the private sector, my career in the Army) and how we came to be studying Theology together (Simon is training to be a Priest, and I'm trying to figure out if that might be what God is calling me to do too).

The couple were very friendly and engaging. They briefly explained why they no longer go to church; they had met a number of 'so-called Christians' who turned out to be hypocrites. They had lost their faith in the religion and didn't have a relationship with God. They seemed very interested in our mission and asked us lot of questions, particularly about how we'd survive for 24 hours with nothing. When we explained that we were relying on our faith in God and in people, they immediately invited us to have dinner with them, there in the bistro/bar. They told us to order anything on the menu, and soon we were all eating enormous gourmet burgers and chips and sharing our life stories.

When it came to paying, we thanked them again and again for their generosity, feeling a mixture of deep gratitude and something else. What was it? For me it was the faintest whiff of embarrassment and awkwardness at our situation. This couple were spending a substantial sum of money on two people they had never met before. I had to keep reminding myself that it was a blessing for them to give, and that they did so freely and spontaneously. And yet, not being used to hand-outs, and being heavily influenced by my own Money Story, I found being in a position where I couldn't offer to give them anything in return, really quite hard. But then Simon reminded me that there was something we could give. He leaned forward and, despite knowing their history with the church and their feelings about it, he quietly asked if there was anything we could pray for.

Nobody spoke. They just looked at each other for a long time and then the wife began to cry. Her husband put his arm around her shoulder and they told us, through their tears, that yes there were some situations they would like us to pray for. It felt absolutely right for me to put my hand over hers and I did whilst she shared with us a particularly sad situation in their lives concerning ill parents, and a recent death. The four of us sat there at that table, bonded together in our shared experience, knowing none of us would ever forget this night; the night we experienced the spontaneous and liberal generosity of strangers at the very beginning of our mission, and for them the night they met two Christians and felt moved to buy them dinner, and request prayer.

We didn't share contact details. We didn't need to. When we got outside into the cold and wet night, they walked with us for a while. I naturally fell into step with the wife, and Simon walked with the husband. They pointed us in the direction of the homeless shelter and we parted ways after a tearful but hope-filled embrace. Simon and I prayed for them when they left. We simply prayed that when they got home, when they went to bed and talked about their evening, that they would be moved by curiosity to start asking God if He was listening. We prayed that they would begin to pray.