

Sean Stillman

Sean gave us a metaphor for his work. Take a framed oil painting, remove the frame and on the canvas around the edge you are likely to find messy splodges of oil paint where the artist mixed small amounts of paint to obtain the exact colour for perhaps a single brush stroke in the final picture. Zac's Place in Swansea is part of the mess around the edge.

Zac's Place, which Sean started in 1998, grew out of Sean's experiences with motorcycle groups around the world through the God's Squad Christian Motorcycle Group, the maddest mix of individuals – mainly men – you could meet, where lives were transformed through a unique lay ministry with people of all denominations. Within the subculture of the motorcycle gangs, it took years to earn the right to speak, enduring ridicule and generally being given a hard time, but not backing down, until Sean was seen as a chaplain and conducted funerals and weddings, sometimes with thousands attending. Those taking part might say that they did not care anything for what Sean was trying to do, or his God, 'but at these times we need you'.

Shortly after Sean moved, for family reasons, to live in Swansea, he conducted three funerals in quick succession. All three funerals were linked to the local biker community. Those at the funerals liked what had been said but would not go to church. Sean arranged meetings in a local bar where the only certain thing was that there would be a thought for the day taken from the Bible. These meetings where there was often a performance by singer/songwriter continued without any certainty whether it was good or what was happening, other than it was a place for people to be honest and real. Week by week over the years a community of the homeless, rough sleepers, those with problems of addiction, or mental issues has grown. No group was targeted, the meetings were open to all, and it provided a safe space for all sorts.

Sean, while looking for somewhere to use as an office, he came across an old chapel, which morphed into Zac's Place which was characterised as 'for ragamuffins' but was it 'offering a faith for ragamuffins?' The door of Zac's Place is open to everyone. Inside it is something of a cross between an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and an Accident and Emergency department. It is open from 7pm to 10.30pm with the first two hours having a formal pattern: old-fashioned Bible study, topped and tailed with prayer. After 9pm is a time to talk and this is as important as the formal part. During the whole time there are people coming and going, and the people who come and go may be 'posh', addicts, prostitutes, drunk, When people began asking for baptisms, and for communion, the question mark – a faith for ragamuffins? – began to disappear.

Zac's Place takes its name from Zacchaeus a tax-collector in Jericho who encountered Jesus, and to whom Jesus said 'I'm coming to your place.' Jesus found his place in the margins among the people of the margins of the society of his time. In the city centre we do not have to go far to find those on the margins, and urbanisation is increasing and increasingly the marginalised drift into the cities.

Four stories:

- Sean recalls sitting among the bin bags, sharing soup with Bob, avoiding the eyes of the police who, at that time in Swansea, cleared the beggars off the streets before Christmas ... Bob's gaze was elsewhere ... a pretty young girl, tottering on high heels ... spread-eagled in a doorway, vomiting ... a tear ran down Bob's cheek ... Bob said, 'It doesn't have to be this way' ... he had more of a clue to what was going on than many.
- Zac's Place ... the door opened to reveal two figures in forensic suits ... 'They've charged us with murder and taken all our clothes' ... these were two of the regulars naked under their paper suits ... how safe they felt in their nakedness under their paper clothing ... a safe space is necessary for people to feel real. At Zac's Place the homeless guy, the chaotic street drinker, the zombie, the prostitute ... are embraced by the group ... they are fully part of the group ... they feel they can contribute to the Bible study.
- The lady in the pub, fragile, broken ... she had been to a lot of churches ... tried counselling in lots of places ... but could only get so far in her explanation before ... 'It's too big for us' ... then one last church ... they laid hands on her and prayed ... the worse things ... she had been ritually abused ... surrounded by men ... touching. It took years of talking with her ... no one touched her ... the demonic influence left her 'like a butterfly'.

We don't know what people are going through so we must be careful what we do, what we say ... lightly or snide.

- Zac's Place ... a chaotic lady came in during a Bible study that was going very well ... she had been chucked out of her accommodation, had a bucket of water poured over her and had her purse stolen ... a mate fetched a bowl of water and knelt at her feet ... peels of her socks ... she'd been living rough for years ... more than socks came off ... he bathed her feet ... she began to sing 'Yes, Jesus loves me' ... she was found dead a week later ... two hundred at her funeral including her father who had wanted her to come home ... they sang 'Yes, Jesus loves me' ... her father said 'That's the song I used to sing to her to get her to sleep as a child.' A small fragment of faith she had been hanging on to had been released by the washing of her feet.

Embrace the beatitudes and live with them and take them seriously, taking the Gospel to the margins.

Is Zac's Place alternative? Only as alternative as Jesus. The Gospel is radical, if not then what are we missing?

Points arising during questions and comments

When encountering and responding to vulnerable and needy people:

- it takes time
- the right person may not be there at the right time
- the church can be awful
- the 'dog' collar is a barrier
- need a flexible person on the front desk
- food and drink break down barriers
- sometimes need to say come back in ...
- need clear boundaries
- it helps if their previous experience is one of acceptance
- we have lay volunteers, with some training, who listen to people who come - this brings such people in the weekday church life
- having chaotic people in a church can be good for church people
- Zac's Place is a specialist church, should other churches specialise - What about people with mental health problems? Some of whom battle daily with sanity. Mental health is a taboo subject that society is scared to talk about - a significant problem (23% of the UK population have mental health problems at some time [Is this right?])
- Sean responded: I guess it is ... there will always be specialist churches determined by context but there is a real mish-mash of people in city centres. People and churches miss out by thinking it's someone else's job
- make churches safe for everyone
- there are more satanic rituals than we know about
- Zac's Place costs between £8,000 and £10,000 per annum