

**David Nixon**

*Stories from the Street: A Theology of Homelessness* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), pp. ix + 202, ISBN 978-1-4094-3746-8 (pbk). £19.99.

When faith-based organizations and churches provide support for the homeless in the form of shelters and/or soup kitchens, the theological perspective has often been one in which the Christian is called upon to feed the hungry. David Nixon, in his book *Stories from the Street: A Theology of Homelessness*, flips this theological perspective on its head. Instead of beginning with the premise that the homeless are to be acted upon, he attempts to develop a theology of homelessness by beginning with the stories of those living on the streets. Nixon identifies two purposes in writing this book. First, he wants 'to produce a theology of story' that stems from a pastoral experience with the homeless, 'which opens up further possibilities in the exploration of specific stories of homeless people' (p. 7). His second and ultimate purpose is to develop a theology of homelessness that 'includes analysis of these homeless stories in dialogue with Christian scriptures, Church tradition and other theologies' (p. 7).

To achieve this dual purpose, Nixon organizes his book into three parts. Part one outlines the methodological and practical implications of collecting stories of homeless people. Chapter one focuses on the privileged storyteller and the form of the story of the marginalized, drawing on the work of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez. Chapter two examines the place of God in these stories, in the attempt to draw conclusions about a theology of story; in this chapter, Nixon relies heavily upon Karl Barth's work on biblical narratives to help him make his case. Chapter three highlights certain methodological and ethical issues associated with narrative enquiry, which takes the form of semi-structured interviews carried out at two locations in the south west of England: St Piran's Centre and Aubyn House.

Part two of this book consists of six chapters summarizing Nixon's research. Chapter four provides the social, cultural, political and legislative context of his study; namely, the history of homelessness and housing in Britain, as well as the events leading up to the 2007–2008 housing market crisis. Chapter five introduces the subjects of Nixon's studies in the form of life histories. He uses excerpts from semi-structured interviews he conducted with eleven homeless people, as well as his own biography. Chapters six to nine focus on four themes that he draws out of the narratives he collected; these themes are biography, emotions, spirituality and reading the Bible together. The last of these chapters, chapter nine, that focuses on the theme of reading the Bible, seems to stand alone in that it does not use the original eleven narratives as its source; it

uses a separate contextual Bible study with another group of homeless people. Nixon examines how this other group of homeless people read and interpret the Bible from the margins, and the possible implications of this for a theology of homelessness.

In the third and final part of this book, Nixon attempts to draw conclusions and more definitively define a theology of homelessness. Chapter ten discusses how the stories of the homeless people that he relays support the methodologies he uses. The following chapter examines church policy and practice in England, and the attitude of Christian Scripture towards homelessness. The final chapter reconciles the stories of the homeless with Christian traditions, policies, practices and Scripture by outlining a theological approach, which focuses on the Trinity and a God who shares the experience with the marginalized; thus, he gives value to the stories of the homeless in his attempt to construct a theology of story for the homeless.

Nixon's attempt to develop a theology of homelessness is personal. He begins by recounting an experience with a homeless man, Simon, whom he met in a hostel in Devon, England. At the time, Nixon was a recently ordained curate, while Simon was a narcotics user and part of a rehabilitation programme. As Simon talked about his life experiences, Nixon found the conversation to be 'godly, even though God was never mentioned' (p. 1). Nixon was struck by the irony that he was learning about God from the man who, in other circumstances, may have been the subject of conversion efforts. It is from this starting point that Nixon investigates how the marginalized understand God, and what they can teach the wealthy about life, ourselves and God.

Nixon is successful in his first purpose for writing this book; that is, it does make a contribution towards a theology of story for the homeless. He successfully conveys the stories of homelessness and, with the wisdom of his pastoral experience, weaves those stories into an insightful and at times gripping narrative. His dialogue with other theologians who have engaged in the role of narrative and story-telling in their theology of the marginalized is particularly rich. Yet in so far as Nixon develops a theology of homelessness, there is still much work to be done. Although he offers analysis and insight into how the stories of the homeless interact with Christian Scriptures and tradition, it is disjointed. For example, his chapter devoted to the Bible study with another homeless group, that he conducted with fellow researcher Susannah Cornwall (ch. 9), does not fit with the eleven stories he uses in the previous chapters. Furthermore, the eleven stories from the same context is a relatively small sample on which to ground a general theology of homelessness; it might, therefore, be best to see this book as a starting point for such a theological endeavour. Nevertheless, this book should still be a welcome repository of hope and

inspiration for Christians who work with those on the margins, such as the homeless, and who want to make sense of how their experiences and the stories they encounter play out in their traditions, Scriptures and theologies.

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