**The Shrewsbury Ark, by Emily Bell, Chair of Trustees**

**Talk on 10th October 2021 to Members of Benefice of Great Hanwood, Longden and Annscroft with Pulverbatch**

The Shrewsbury Ark is a **Daycentre for homeless and vulnerable people**, based opposite the station in Shrewsbury.

As we are a small, independent charity we can interpret the word “vulnerable” as we see fit. Sofa surfers, care leavers, rough sleepers, prison leavers, people with social issues, mental health problems and addictions – there is no judgement at the Ark, no hoops to jump through to access our services.

We believe charity sees the need and not the cause – and if you need our help, we are here to give it.

You may have some idea about who we are and what we do but for those who aren’t so sure here are some basic facts about the Ark

* We have 5 members of staff headed up by our awesome manager Wendy and our longest standing member of staff Rose. Together they lead a team of 30 volunteers, who give their time for free and without whom we would not exist.
* We regularly see up to 30 people come through our door each day, all with very different stories and needs
* On an average day we generally prepare both lunch and breakfast for up to 20 people.
* We are open Monday to Friday 9am – 2pm for drop-in services, but take appointments up to 4pm

From our very cramped and basic day centre we provide hot, nutritious food, a shower room, a washing machine and a dryer, use of a laptop and charging facilities, free Wi-Fi and a postal address.

We give clients clean clothes, shoes, camping equipment and emergency food parcels. We supply mobile phones, purchase travel passes and book taxis. Once we register a client we can help with filling in forms for housing, universal credit, job applications and debt management.

We also run enrichment activities like our allotment, and our football team.

We work with partner agencies and individuals to provide or signpost appropriate counselling and addiction services and physical and mental healthcare professionals. We run several regular clinics from our tiny premises to ensure our clients get the medical care they are entitled to including a GP service and Mental Health and Hep C clinics.

Our outreach worker Cherry, backed by a team of volunteers goes out and about in Shrewsbury, verifying rough sleepers and making sure they know where we are. Cherry and her team also visit existing clients of the Ark who are in accommodation, and continue to support them to maintain their tenancies and help them to make their flats their homes.

And we do all this from a cramped and run down two up, two down, which the council provided for us as a “temporary” base over 10 years ago! It is so small that only 2 people are allowed in the kitchen at a time and much to our great sadness, we often have to ask our clients to wait outside in the rain, as there is no space for them inside.

BUT we have fantastic and exciting news!! During those 10 years our treasurer has been busy scrimping and saving to enable us to buy our own premises and we finally got the keys to our new home in July this year.

The New Ark is just down the road from where we are now in the Old Rock & Fountain pub in Castle Foregate. Accessible to town and local transport hubs, yet just out of the centre and with 6 times the floor space, the new building is the perfect base to continue to grow and improve our services.

The new Ark will enable us to have all of our rough sleepers inside and safely off the streets during opening hours, with no one waiting outside in the rain.

We hope that with a more approachable exterior, more members of our community will feel welcome to visit the Ark and seek help before their issues escalate. Preventing homelessness with practical and emotional support is always preferable to supporting people once they are on the street.

With the new Day centre operating at full capacity, Shropshire will have a vibrant community hub where people can go to seek help, socialise and feel accepted. Our partners from sister charities, healthcare providers and the council will be able to engage with our clients in a safe and trusted environment, working together to help them to move forward with their lives.

Unfortunately, the need for our services will never run out, there will always be people in need of help who have exhausted all other options and as long as we continue to be supported by the donations of our local community, people like you, we will continue to be there for them.

Thank you for your time today and for your support, without you we simply wouldn’t exist.

***Frequently asked Questions:***

**What do you say to people who say it’s the Ark that brings rough sleepers into our town?**

If that’s the case I’m deeply proud of Shrewsbury and all the people in it who donate to our cause in order to support those less fortunate than themselves. We are a town of sanctuary and I am saddened that there isn’t an Ark providing similar support in every town.

**Do you charge for your services?**

No we do not charge for any of our services

**Do you offer overnight accommodation?**

We don’t currently offer any overnight accommodation as we just don’t have the funding to manage it. Once the new premises are up and running we definitely hope to look at various housing models to see if we might be able to support something that could tackle the chronic lack of suitable housing that we currently see in the town today.

**What happens to the homeless when you are closed?**

They have nowhere to go. On weekends and evenings there is no provision and most public conveniences are locked overnight. Some wonderful church and volunteer groups, including the Street Pastors provide what support they can but they are completely on their own. Once we are settled into the new building, and if we can get council permission, we would like to look at allowing these groups to operate from the building during the days on weekends to provide basic food and washing facilities, but that is for further down the line.

**Homelessness Sunday Sermon 10th October 2021 by Revd Graham Earney**

Isaiah 61.1-4

Matthew 25.31-46

You have heard from Emily how much can be achieved by a small dedicated staff and volunteers at the Ark. You have heard how multi-layered are the issues and symptoms surrounding any one homeless, or ill-housed person. You have also heard how great the need is – 30 people a day attending Ark’s day centre in a place the size of Shrewsbury! But, as you also heard need outstrips the ability to respond, which is why the news of the new premises is such good news.

My task is to put the Ark’s experience into a national context. It is also to put it into the context of God’s love for all humanity. The first thing to recognise is that Shrewsbury is not alone. The work of Ark is necessary the length and breadth of the country, and beyond. Small and large housing associations seek to provide accommodation and support services for those currently on the streets. Each works with partners, as does Ark, to ensure that every pound stretches as far as it can. But the need still grows.

When looking at the love of God for all humanity our first resort is to our treasure trove in scripture. The two readings today do not leave us wanting. The passage from towards the end of Isaiah harks back to his former words in the servant songs and further still back to the concept of Jubilee. Their words here is to prompt memory of being the servants of God caring for the needs of those in most need. The time of Jubilee, which occurred every 50 years, allowed for the freeing of those who had become slaves. It also returned ancestral lands to their original owners. They are word suitable for Homelessness Sunday. They lay on us to free those who have been enslaved by circumstances beyond an individual’s power. They also challenge us to return the possibility of good accommodation and the ability to rebuild broken lives from those who have had these things taken from them.

The passage from Matthew is the last in the gospel before the beginning of the passion of Jesus. It is a parable about what will happen to those who care for others in need and those who do not. It looks forward to the future kingdom of God when people will not be rewarded for being good, but for the good they have done for others. The Ark and Housing Associations attempt to care for all those in need. Yes, we have to be honest, some have got to where they are by their own fault – by the wrong choices they have made. But many are where they are because of the activity, or inactivity of others. In a survey in a rural area similar to Shropshire 75% of those who were homeless were so through broken relationships – not always their own! When I was the secretary of a small Housing association housing nine 16 to 25 year olds the saddest letter I ever received came on a Thursday morning. It read something like this

“Dear Sirs, Sometime ago you helped my eldest daughter with temporary housing. I ask that you do the same for my younger daughter. I am getting re-married on Saturday and my new husband will not have her in the house. I will have to put her out on Friday. Yours sincerely, “

We had no vacant rooms. But we were part of the local housing forum and through it we got her temporary lodging until we had a room become free.

“Jesus said, ‘truly, truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’.”

As Emily said, it isn’t just about finding places for people. It is about providing the support and care, perhaps over a long period. For some the road to recovery from disability and addiction can be a long and bumpy road. I shall never forget my first committee meeting at that small Housing Association. It had been set up under a provision which allowed for 6 month licences – to give enough space for a young person to get on their feet. On the agenda was licence of a heroin addict which was about to expire. She was making progress in her treatment but not yet clear of addiction. After much discussion we agreed to throw over the rule and extend her stay. Yes, it was a long road, with more than one set back. But when she left us, having done a long training course, it was to be a drug counsellor in the West Midlands. New life for her, and the possibility of new life for many others.

I end by asking you to join with me in a quiet meditation which will replace today’s intercessions. I will say a short sentence for all of us to think about in silence, before moving on to the next:

1. We give thanks for the work of Ark in Shrewsbury and all other similar projects throughout the country.
2. Lord, we pray for Emily, and especially all the staff and volunteers at the Ark – particularly when they face hard times and challenges. Be with them as they move into new premises and the next phase of their work.
3. We give thanks for the work of Housing Associations throughout the country as they seek to find shelter for those who have none.
4. We pray for Church Homelessness Trust, and similar bodies, which provide the basic necessities of life as people move off the streets into accommodation.
5. Lord, help us to think more deeply about others, and those who have not enjoyed the benefits of life that we take for granted. My we be more generous in our prayer life and in the sharing of our resources.

Amen

Sermon on Homelessness Sunday 10th October 2021 in Benefice of Great Hanwood, Longden and Annscroft with Pulverbatch, Revd Graham Earney