

Homeless toll hit 5,000 across Ireland in March

MORE than 5,000 people were homeless across the country in March and over 200 were found sleeping rough in Dublin on one night this month.

A headcount on April 4 found 138 people who had been forced to bed down on the streets of the capital, up a third on last April. Another 57 were recorded in Merchant's Quay Ireland's Night Cafe. Officials also found 23 Romanians, who had travelled here after offers of work, sleeping outside.

The monthly report on emergency accommodation revealed that 3,299 adults and 2,134 children were homeless in March.

Simon Coveney recommitted

By Ed Carty

to a deadline of the middle of this year to end the use of hotels and B&Bs for emergency beds for families unless the circumstances are exceptional. 'There are no quick-fix solutions here but I will continue to work with my colleagues in Government and all stakeholders to address the major challenge that is homelessness,' said the Housing Minister.

Detail on the spring rough sleeper count in Dublin showed 85 people had previously accessed homeless services.

The vast majority of rough sleepers were found on the streets of the city. Men out-

numbered women by about four to one.

Winter 2014 was the worst on record for rough sleepers, when 168 people were counted on the streets.

Pat Doyle, chief executive of the Peter McVerry Trust, said there had been hopes the number would come down with new beds and homes being made available.

'We need better and stronger supports for vulnerable people, people who find it very difficult to comply with a one-size-fits-all approach,' he said.

Roughan MacNamara of Focus Ireland said the increase in rough sleepers was expected but disappointing.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Ancient truth in a familiar Disney song

IT was a sweltering day in Los Angeles. It was mid-summer 1992, and I was on a trip to Disneyland in Anaheim. I went thinking that I was above it all, but, as so often happens, it changed me forever.

Being much more daring than I, my friends went on all the most adventurous rides. This meant that I took refuge in the theatres where popular Disney productions ran throughout the day. It was in the middle of the afternoon when it happened, an experience that still brings me to tears.

Just as I strolled into an outdoor amphitheatre, Angela Lansbury's beautiful voice rang out over the sun-soaked hills. Many will remember her as amateur detective Jessica Fletcher, in the television drama *Murder She Wrote*. I remember her as the voice of Mrs Potts in *Beauty And The Beast*.

Her voice was beautiful in the way that antique things are. It was the voice of my grandparents' era, one that issued from the heart and rang with deep conviction. No glitz or affectation, but just that authentic homely sound which promises to keep you warm and safe.

I stood there watching a rare beauty dance with her beloved beast, but I was mesmerised by Mrs Potts and her glorious tune. So simple and melodic, yet a lyric which seemed to contain everything there is to know about love, friendship and human longing. Great volumes have been written about such things, but there it was, all laid out with such clarity and beauty.

*'Tale as old as time
True as it can be
Barely even friends
Then somebody bends
Unexpectedly'*

I tried to repress my tears but it was no use. As I listened, it struck me that this was, indeed, a tale as old as time. We cling to our defences, our protective devices to the point where we squander golden opportunities to love, to risk life with those who will unlock its secrets.

But then, just when all seems lost, when we are on the verge of giving up, somebody bends. The defences fall, the shield comes down and we learn to live again.

We all know what it is like: the row that has gone on too long because we simply won't bend; the chances missed because our

pride blocks the path to peace. All it takes, however, is 'just a little change, small to say the least'. The courage to say 'sorry', to offer one's hand as a peace offering, to embrace without saying a word.

And then, it is as though the clouds lift and our broken world is healed.

It is 'just a little change', but very often it catches us by surprise. Often, we 'are both a little scared, neither one prepared'.

We refuse to acknowledge the other even though we know that a single smile will change everything.

A little song, a voice of age and elegance, a wonderful lesson in life: that is what Mrs Potts gave me that day and I have never forgotten it. A 'tale as old as time', a 'song as old as rhyme'. In a children's lyric, I discovered all there is to know about cleansing old wounds, putting the past aside and building a new future.

*'Tale as old as time
Tune as old as song
Bitter sweet and strange
Finding you can change
Learning you were wrong'*

Is there anything more liberating than finding you can change, that you were in the wrong and that, just by bending a little, a relationship can be restored? Learning that you were wrong is not humiliating, but humbling. It is to discover that a good life does not consist in blindly clinging to principles and prejudices, especially when they cause hurt and harm.

YES, all it takes is 'just a little change, small to say the least'. All it takes is for someone to bend, to cease being scared and to make the first move. Then it happens: 'Certain as the sun, rising in the east', we embrace and dance like *Beauty and the Beast*.

The other day, I dropped Mrs Dooley and the boys to see Disney's remake of that lovely movie. Judging by their swollen eyes, I could see it had a similar effect on them. Since then, the sound of Mrs Potts has filled our home.

Thankfully, even after 25 years, she sounds...

*'Ever just the same
Ever a surprise
Ever as before
Ever just as sure as the sun will rise'*

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