





I think we find the clue in that story of the fisherman's wife, who could not find a home to satisfy her. Her hut was damp and dingy so she wanted a nice little cottage-fair enough. But then the cottage looked small beside the large houses of her neighbours and so she wanted a grander house, then a palace and even then she could not be happy because she could not stop the sun from rising too early in the morning. (I actually remember reading a newspaper article about a couple who bought their dream home in the countryside and then tried to sue a local farmer because his cockerel crowed too early in the morning for their convenience).

Going back to the story, it is obvious to us, as it was to the magic fish, that the fisherman's wife will never be content no matter how large or how lovely a house she lives in. No house will ever become a "home" for her because she is not at home in herself. She is not happy in her own skin.

*Home is where the heart is* and if your heart is not at peace then you will never create a proper home. You may buy or build houses that get bigger and bigger and grander and grander and more and more exclusive but you will never feel properly secure – which is how a home should make you feel- if you are not at rest in yourself.

This was something Jesus did teach. Remember his story of the wise man who built his house on rock and the foolish man who built his house on sand? This was not about houses but about lives and characters. If your character is shaped by greed and self-gratification, then you will not long survive the storms of life.

Or remember another of Jesus' stories about the rich farmer who, like the fisherman's wife, could never be content? He kept on producing more and more crops and building bigger and bigger barns to store them in, saying "*when this is done, I will take time to enjoy my life.*" But he was still amassing more and more produce when the time came for him to die. He never got round to enjoying his life.

And the trouble is, that while people like this are frantically building bigger and bigger houses in an attempt to find this elusive sense of satisfaction, they are grabbing far more of their share of the world's resources and forcing many others into the poverty and the social unrest which makes for widespread homelessness. Even natural disasters cannot always be labelled simply "acts of God." Many people are compelled to live in areas known to be dangerous because others-richer and more powerful-seize all the safer land for themselves. Did you know, for example, that in the Philippines 5% of the population own 90% of the land?

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Like every other gift we ask from God this Christmas, shelter, homes have to begin on the inside. Real homes are created by warm and happy personalities. And no house alone, no matter how grand, can bring a warm and happy personality into existence. That is the huge mistake which our materialist society is making and there are many victims of this mistake-both rich and poor.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became homeless himself in order to make this point. Of course he grieved for his people, squirming under the heavy hand of Roman Occupation but he wanted to show them that no physical circumstance, no material change could ever take from them their identity as God's people. He had no home but he was still God's Son and nothing could take that from him.

He was also concerned to show his people that, even were they again to claim sole rights over their geographical territory, this would not mean that they had sole rights over God. God was not contained in any one country. God was the God of all people

and of all places. Religion should not create exclusive ghettos in which people lived in perpetual fear of spiritual contamination. It should bring into being open and welcoming communities in which people found spiritual growth and truth.

At the end of Monica Dickens' novel Joy-or-Josephine had to face the fact that she would probably never know who her birth family were or where was the home in which she had been born. But it did not matter anymore. She had come to terms with the person she was right now. She was herself and happy to be herself. She was reconciled with the adoptive mother who had loved her tenderly and brought her up. She had love to give to a young man she hoped to marry. She had strength, skills and concern to offer to her fellow countrymen in the Second World War, which was now well underway. Wherever she went she would make a home for herself and help others to do the same because she was finally at home in herself. And it is only as men and women become at home in themselves that the horrors of homelessness will finally be eradicated.

I would like to close with this poem by Kathy Galloway, called Do Not Retreat:

*Do not retreat into your private world  
That place of safety, sheltered from the storm  
Where you may tend your garden, seek your soul  
And rest with loved ones while the fire burns warm.*

*To tend a garden is a precious thing,  
But dearer still the one where all may roam;  
The weeds of poison, poverty and war  
Demand your care, who call the earth your home.*

*To seek your soul, it is a precious thing,  
But you will never find it on your own  
Only among the clamour, threat and pain  
Of other people's need will love be known*

*To rest with loved ones is a precious thing,  
But peace of mind exacts a higher cost;  
Your children will not rest and play in quiet  
While they still hear the crying of the lost*

*Do not retreat into your private world,  
There are more ways than firesides to keep warm  
There is no shelter from the rage of life,  
So meet its eye and dance within the storm.*

Amen.