



## Christmas: it's not just for Christmas

There was an old slogan about the danger of people buying their children puppies as presents:

"A dog is for life, not just for Christmas."

I was reminded of this, paradoxically, at last night's meeting of my church's Council (Parochial Church Council to be precise).

In it, we were reviewing progress on two upcoming social projects.

The first was the Christmas lunch, which we organise at the YMCA, for people who might not have anywhere else to go at Christmas. We've been doing it for years, and the woman in charge this year reported that the number of people volunteering was healthier than ever, with volunteers both from the congregation and also the local community. (Though if you can help by being a driver, taking people to and from the YMCA, there's still room for helpers there.)

The next was our Nightshelter project, where we open our church-hall for six successive Sunday nights in February and March for people otherwise sleeping rough. The woman in charge this year reported the opposite: far from a surfeit of volunteers, she urgently needed more people to volunteer to staff the night shelter.

This is partly about logistics. Volunteering on a Sunday evening, through the night or early on a Monday morning is a tougher ask, for people who work, than volunteering for Christmas Day, when many people

aren't working. It may also be about publicity: the Christmas lunch has been going for years and people know about it, so they know to volunteer. The night shelter is a relatively new project for us, and we perhaps haven't publicised it as well, even among our own congregation.

There is a danger of something deeper, though, which is far from healthy.

This is that volunteering at Christmas is natural and makes sense and perhaps relieves guilt about a season otherwise full of overconsumption. When Christmas passes, the Christmas spirit dies, and people can't be bothered any more; to volunteer more than one day a year is all a bit too much like hard work.

If this is true, then this is a travesty of what Christmas is about, in that the change towards goodness, if it's only temporary, is hardly a change at all. Do we imagine that Scrooge went back to his miserly ways in January?

Worse than that, it's a travesty of what people need. Sure, Christmas can be a horrendous time for many, and it's a particularly acute time which requires compassion, but life doesn't get much better on a cold night in February if you're homeless. My prayer is that the Christmas spirit can extend out into 2018.

(If you want to volunteer, yourself, at the nightshelter in the first instance email us at [sasms@btinternet.com](mailto:sasms@btinternet.com), and you will be contacted.)

*December 2017. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*