

Let us now praise marginalized men

Three very different funerals; three different men, but one thing in common.

Peter died alone in London, well-known but on the margins, a Jamaican by birth, a Bomber Command veteran, with no known family in contact. A public appeal got him what he deserved; a proper military funeral at the RAF Church St Clement Danes, a crowd both inside and out, Jamaican flags being waved by many, partly in defiance to those who would airbrush West Indians from British and Commonwealth history.

John died alone too, in this city of Hamilton, his body discovered by a neighbour. He remained in the morgue for two months until a Funeral Director got in touch with the RSA. John had no family within reach either. He had had a long and honourable career in the New Zealand Army, and he too got what he deserved; burial with full honours in the RSA plot at Hautapu Cemetery.

Then we come to Mike the Juggler, found dead in Loafers' Lodge Wellington, after a life on Lambton Quay; everyone knew him, but he was still on the margins. Did anyone ask where he lived? At least he had family at his funeral, which by all accounts was simple and dignified, his trademark tennis balls atop the coffin.

Jesus rubbed shoulders with the Peters, the Johns and the Mikes on every page of every Gospel, so why are there so many of these men left to die alone, or in suspicious fires in accommodation fit only for the marginalized?

Have we learned to construct myths about them, narratives of avoidance? Poverty and loneliness are self-inflicted we say. It is a lifestyle choice they make – nothing to do with us we say as we look away.

Is the church doing enough to challenge these narratives of avoidance? Is donating money to men's shelters and produce to our foodbanks going to cut it? Or do we need to enter the conversation about the causes of poverty and marginalization in a way that truly reflects our understanding of Christian responsibility? This will involve stepping into political territory, and so we need to be equipped. We need to understand the drivers of marginalization, especially for men who are lonely and friendless. There's plenty of information available in Hamilton; time to get motivated by a good speaker who can explain it to us.