

## Bet Your Life Geoff Best

The skies opened and the rain fell in torrents, as four bedraggled people walked as briskly as the weather allowed across an almost empty car park at York Races. The day had started with an early breakfast and on the course by 9.30am and now, at approaching 6pm, the shift was over. I'd been a disinterested, but not uninterested, observer of chaplaincy at work, and would spend the evening reflecting on what I'd seen and heard.

Context, they say, is everything. So I'll begin, to use a racing metaphor, near the starting stalls. I'm an ancient preacher (and teacher), who is engaged to a presbyter, who spends part of her week as a chaplain ... to a casino. She was meeting up with a colleague who is a chaplain to the racing industry. So I had some background knowledge but not a lot. I had not been to the races for decades and then it was as a simple observer of a world totally foreign to me. Until last summer, when I stayed in Las Vegas, I'd never been in a casino so, in both cases, there is an element of culture shock. In a race, the horses break from the stalls and, if it's over a longer distance, they settle down to assess the situation and get well positioned. And that's what we did – joining the morning briefing of all security staff and being introduced to people at every level of responsibility, long before the racegoers arrived. Then, as the people started to arrive in all manner of dress on a family day, we mingled and watched the chaplaincy team at work.

The races began, and it was lively and hectic with barely time to see the winners leave their enclosure before the next race began. I'm not going to describe it by the furlong or by the hour – the chaplains can do that better than any amateur – but I will share two stories. One is second-hand from the casino, and one, first-hand from the races. Casino staff are busy people and not necessarily at ease with a 'God-botherer'. Indeed at least one person made it clear that, whilst content to see a chaplain present, he wouldn't be making use of the service (!). Instead, over time, he simply engaged in conversation – about his family and the desire to see his children enjoy some of the things he'd enjoyed as a child, including playing in the local stream. So a suggested location was provided ...

As we walked the stands at York a steward was engaged in conversation about his home area – the same town my parents came from. The chaplain and he had met before but only briefly and, unlike some, weren't on first name terms. Out of nowhere he started to talk of the loss of his parents, while fighting back the tears. A chance (?) conversation.

In both these incidents Christ was present and people were 'as Christ to the world'. Not different or set apart, though it happens that both chaplains are presbyters, but others on the course were and are not.

The crowds are getting loud as the winning post is neared, betting slips clutched or torn and the bookies calculating their margins. There, in the midst of life, are people being church ... going where they are needed and where the people are, even if it's not places many of us normally go ... but then we already go to the sort of places that we normally go to! It was a small victory and a small prize, but part of something much bigger.

Finally, the horses are showered and rubbed down, the crowds drift away in good humour and some perhaps remember those odd folks in red anoraks with "Chaplain" printed on them, who had smiled and wished them well and, if welcomed, stopped for a chat.

And so home, to the stables and a nosebag ... in the dry.

