

Beggar Plus

Big spots of rain on the pavement compelled Lydia to enter the church hall. She had been outside for quite a while, walking to the end of the street and back, hesitating about going in. She may be having a hard time but she still retained her self pride. The food bank was the last place she could ever have seen herself visiting as a client. But then, neither could she have ever have dreamed life would have worked out like this for her.

At the door she paused to glance around. Would there be anyone who knew her? There were not many people in the hall. A young couple sat at one of the tables with tea and sandwiches which was all part of the church's contribution to this food bank.

Can I help you? The cheerful welcome eased Lydia's apprehension. Clutching her voucher she almost ran across to the reception desk.

Would you mind waiting a few moments? We have to take a few details from you, but Joan has just gone to run off a few more forms. She won't be long. Sit down and have a cup of tea or coffee – and a sandwich – it's all free.

The thought of sitting in the hall, unsure of who may come in, only increased Lydia's embarrassment.

May I go into the church and wait?

Of course – through the door on the left there.

Thank you. I know the way.

It had been a while since Lydia was last in the church. She had not been here many times since Ryan's funeral. They had married here and Julie was baptised here. The familiar scent of stale flowers and incense rolled back time into memories. Many happy memories - before the lonely days - before Julie had married and moved away. Now Lydia assumed the succession of excuses meant her daughter was ashamed to come home to sad stories of depression and emptiness. No full-time work and mounting expenses as the house grew older, had brought her to the lowest point physically and emotionally she could ever remember.

Hello! It's Lydia isn't it?

Lydia was startled, surprised and amazed that Father Jim remembered her. *I've come for help from the food bank.* She began to explain but broke off into tears. Father Jim waited and then listened to Lydia's story. *I feel like a beggar!* she cried. *I had so much .. and now nothing!*

You're no more a beggar than I am, laughed Father Jim. *I pass the begging bowl round every Sunday!*

Lydia smiled It was too soon for laughter.

I know what you mean, Jim went on. *But you know we are all beggar's really. None of us deserves all that God gives us. We take it though, and some of us are grateful enough to want to share it with others. And it's not just food. It's friendship and support too. We can give you that here as well if you'll take it. But, but, I still feel it's not right.* Lydia hesitated again. *I've got myself into this mess*

Listen, said Father Jim. *Many years ago when I was a priest in Africa, we had beggars at the door every hour of the day. I always remember one old man who had really come down in life. There was no welfare of course, and he had no family left to help him - which was unusual. We gave him food mostly, rather than money, and sometimes he took clothes. One day I walked out after him. He had not gone far before he met another beggar and gave that beggar a fairly big share of what I had given him. I asked him about it when he came again and suggested that perhaps he didn't need so much if he could give it away. He stared straight at me, grinned and said, 'Father. I have to give some away. Then I don't feel like a beggar.'* Always after that, said Jim, *I used to give him extra rations!*

Jim stood up. *Lydia, you know we here are only beggars sharing what we have with you, and when we help you get well again, you'll be able to do the same. Now, come and have something to eat and drink with me, and I'll introduce you to another couple of beggars who could help you a lot - if you're willing.*