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COMMENT

PROBLEM OF HOMELESSNESS

The problem of homeless people is becoming more and more conspicuous in our big cities. There has always been a hard core of homeless drifters, but now increasing numbers of city dwellers are joining their ranks. They include older people who have not the wherewithal to pay for a residence, as well as larger numbers of younger people.

In New York it is getting more and more difficult for a person of average means to find an apartment for rent; and in the surrounding areas, the prices of homes are likewise out of reach. Dim prospects for a young couple starting out. What sage advice is offered to them? "Stay with parents... save your money... double up with other people."

As for the homeless, even the palliative of providing shelters for them is running into trouble as no neighborhood wants them around. Not having an address they cannot apply for welfare. Civil rights groups are campaigning for the "right" of the homeless to vote. Egad!

It has become commonplace to see these castoffs of society hanging around public places - railroad stations, subways, public libraries, dozing, begging foraging in trash cans. Their presence should be a reproach to us, but instead we have become dulled to it, have developed a blind eye and walk around them. I used to wonder about cities like Calcutta where so many people live in the streets while those better off simply ignore them - but now it's happening here.

Meanwhile, gleaming structures are going up - office buildings, luxury apartments and the like - with high, high rents. Some of these wonders are even given tax breaks, while no solution is in sight for the homeless and near-homeless.

This is in contrast to the situation in New York in the 1920's when, to solve the housing shortage, multiple-dwelling builders were given a 10-year exemption on the building tax, while still paying the land tax. Moderate rental dwellings sprang up all over the city and soon landlords were competing for tenants.

That should give some clue as to what should be done today. Instead, we have retrogressed, and are no better off than when it was said, nearly 2000 years ago:

"The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has not where to lay his head."

R.C.