

Loads of rubbish at St Cuthbert's

Peter Sutton is the minister at the Parish Church of St Cuthbert which sits in Princes Street Gardens. The problem is that some people who use nearby takeaways like McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken drop litter right outside the church front door, as well as elsewhere in the gardens.

We tweeted photos of some of the litter recently and it became one of our top tweets. The rubbish left behind was unbelievable. In response Reverend Sutton suggested to McDonalds on Twitter that he might gather up the rubbish which is mainly their branded takeaway boxes and bags, and deliver it back to their front door.

The mess in Princes Street Gardens has to be seen to be believed [#takeyourlitterhome pic.twitter.com/D8zXGkJUpG](https://twitter.com/D8zXGkJUpG)

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [July 19, 2020](#)

So is there a battle brewing in Princes Street Gardens? Well not exactly, as we found out when we spoke to the minister.

Mr Sutton said: “First of all, I don’t see it as a battle. I’m not taking them on as it were. I’m just more trying to engage with McDonald’s as opposed to seeing this as any sort of strategic campaign and a battle. Certainly that would be the

last thing that I'd be wanting to do. I'm just reaching out to a neighbour as we do from St Cuthbert's. We have good contacts with all our local neighbours and I just want to see if McDonalds and also Kentucky Fried Chicken who are equally close to the kirkyard would like to help sort out the litter problem that their takeaway meals create."

The litter problem is not really a new one. It is just that after the peace and quiet of lockdown the issue is back.

Mr Sutton explained: "Obviously we've been being on our site for a long time 1400 years and managing, you know, issues such as litter is just an ongoing feature of life in the city centre. I don't know if your readers know that the kirkyard is actually owned by the Council, not by St Cuthbert's. We own the building, the big church, and the immediate 10 metre space around it, but the kirk yard is run by the Council parks department.

"I think one of the issues is that there's a wee bit of confusion as to whether it's the parks department that have responsibility for this or us. The kirk yard backs on to West Princes Street Gardens and there is 24 hour direct access into there for the public. So that's always been an issue. But we always send out a team to go and clear litter before our church services. And the other thing we do is we work very closely with our homeless community who live in the West End and a couple of them also clean the graveyard on our behalf. That is not on the council's behalf but on the church's behalf and and we reimburse them for doing that."

A lot of the pastoral work which Reverend Sutton undertakes is with people who are homeless. He said: "The setup at St Cuthbert's is that we have, throughout lockdown and prior to lockdown, run a big meal for the homeless every Sunday night. We have 100 of them usually they come into the church but lockdown's prevented them from doing that, and working with the charity Steps to Hope we have been able every Sunday night

to use the kitchens at St Cuthbert's to create the meals and then we feed and serve our homeless guests out in the kirkyard

“Interestingly, they are the best at looking after their own rubbish. You know, they're very keen and protective and grateful and we have bin bags out and they all go round and clean up after every meal. They're the ones – our good homeless friends – who get annoyed during the week when they see the amount of litter that comes in. They probably think well, people are just going to blame it on us. But it's nothing to do with them. You know, they are very good, tidy guests and always have been.

Any chance [@McDonalds](#) on Princes Street could help us keep the Kirkyard clean. Mainly packaging from your takeaway. Are you ok if we collect and dump back on your doorstep? [@edinhelp](#) [@Edinburgh_CC](#) [@EidynConnect](#) [@edinspotlight](#) [@EdinReporter](#) pic.twitter.com/EkRQt8kwCB

– The Parish Church of St Cuthbert (@cuthbert_church) [July 24, 2020](#)

The church also runs an emergency night shelter at St Cuthbert's which they have not been able to do during lockdown. But now that the other night shelters in Edinburgh have closed for the summer they are looking at relaunching theirs. During the pandemic the council provided shelter for homeless people at one of the hotels on Princes Street.

Reverend Sutton said: “I think homelessness will never fully go away. There always going to be, you know, 30 or 40 people in Edinburgh city centre who for whatever reason, on an emergency basis, just won't have a roof over their heads every night.

“I think the good work the council did over the lockdown was,

you know, very impressive. But I think what people don't appreciate is that within the homeless community, it's not a stable community. And the fact that you can accommodate and get people into homes doesn't mean that there aren't, as it were new people who suddenly within a very short period of time find themselves out on the street and don't have immediate access to any of the council resources. So that's the community that we are focused on, probably the 30 or so who are not accommodated by the council just because of their own personal predicament, or how homelessness has landed on them or, their plight. It's probably going to be more of that going forward I think just because of the financial pressures and emotional, psychological pressures of lockdown as well.

"And I think what you'll find is that for a lot of people, if you're suddenly told, right, you're going go to that hotel, that room, these are the times that you're allowed in. These are the rules and regulations. Then for them, that takes away any sense of choice at all. And a lot of the homeless, are in a place where through whatever bad experiences they've had in life, a lot of them through institutional abuse, find that suddenly being part of another institution just doesn't work for them. And I think we have to respect and understand that."

So is Reverend Sutton going to take the bags of rubbish and leave them with McDonald's on their doorstep?

He chuckled and said: "No, I haven't done it. You talked about the scenario of a battle. I do hold that still in my armoury, but it would be done in a way where I'd just pop in and say, 'Look, guys. Have a look in here. It's all got your brandmark on it, and I've just gone and picked it up. Wouldn't you like to be, you know, responsible as good neighbours for looking after it yourselves?' So yes, I mean, I'm much more open to friendly engagement and hopefully coming to agreement here.

"I think personally that they should offer the homeless community the ability to collect the McDonald's rubbish and

pay them a good wage for doing it, and give them good terms and conditions to that would be community engagement, I think.”

We asked what people could do to help St Cuthbert's.

People are on the streets again at night. And the one thing that can make a huge difference are sleeping bags so if people want to drop sleeping bags off at St Cuthbert's, the best time to do that four o'clock on a Sunday just before we serve the meal to the homeless, that would be one way to help.

“The other way would be always a friendly chat with any of our good homeless friends when you see them. They always appreciate that and lastly, if you are coming through off the Lothian Road steps on what are known as Stockbridge Steps which come off Princes Street into the kirk yard, you know, the church is open, it would be lovely to see you do drop in.

“And if you pass any rubbish, if you pick it up, even if it's not your own, you know, you're just keeping the city clean and in a good state for everyone. I think there's that old adage isn't there, leave some leave something in as good as, or if you can, even better, condition than you find it yourselves. And that's what we're what we're all trying to do, I hope.

“It would be great if everybody took a leaf out of that book.”



St. Cuthberts. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com