

Lent sermon on Dementia.

Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen, whose life was cut, tragically and violently short in June 2016, in her maiden speech in the House of Commons described her constituency as..... 'a gathering of typically independent, no-nonsense and proud Yorkshire towns and villages'.

She continued, 'Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration, be it of Irish Catholics across the constituency or of Muslims from India or Pakistan.

While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency,

is that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other, than things which divide us.'

It is that sentiment, 'More in Common' which is the thread running through our Lent discussions and study this year.

We will be taking 5 very different issues, Dementia, Faith&Ethnicity, Social Class, Family and Justice.....

we will share our thinking, whilst trying to make a connection with the premise that, 'we have more in common than that which divides us.'

So, I begin today with the subject of Dementia.

At a conference on dementia a man in the audience spoke for many when he asked the question, 'Where is God in all this?'

The anguish of that question might remind us of the anguished cry of Jesus, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'

Malcolm Goldsmith, an Anglican Priest, whose ministry of over 40 years, was to those with a developing dementia is quite clear in his thinking on this when he says,

‘God is the umbilical cord which sustains every human being.

God is there..... when all that seems left of a person is an empty shell..... a caricature of what it means to be a person.

He says, ‘I believe that there is no-one of whom it can be said.....

that the Spirit of God cannot penetrate their troubled mind.’

For Malcolm Goldsmith, the person with a dementia..... remains a person up to the point of death.

That person is sanctified ground..... made in the image of God..... whether he or she is in hospital, residential care; in church or at home..... and however lost the former self seems to be.

Each one of us here..... is sanctified ground..... made in the image of God..... with OUR hopes and our fears, not dissimilar to those of a person with a dementia.

The Jewish people during their exile in Babylon, often cried out,

‘Where is our God?’ and taking it one step further asked, ‘How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ ‘How can we worship our God, when everything around us is so strange?’

The experience of dementia has been described as..... ‘living in the strange land of dementia.’

A land where my present moment, the moment in which I am living, is not the same as your present moment, the moment in which you are living;

a land where confusion, irritation, anger even or despair can develop between family members and friends.

From this 'strange land' the person with a dementia, their family member or spouse, may cry out to God in the same way that other people cry out to God over

Illness, disability, bereavement, overwhelming debt; when they feel helpless, hopeless and lost.

The anguish of our cry to God is what we all have in common.

With today's Gospel in mind, we might say of the experience of Jesus, that He found Himself in 'the strange land of the wilderness' where He was faced with confusion, despair and aloneness.

And we might find comfort in the knowledge, that in some way, Jesus can identify and empathize with the person living in 'the strange land of dementia,' because of His experience in 'the strange land of the wilderness.'

Christine Bryden was 46years old;..... had a high powered job in the department of the Australian Prime Minister..... and was a single mother of 3 when she was diagnosed with early on-set Alzheimer's disease in 1995.

She is still living with that condition today.

As well as maintaining her job for as long as she could, and functioning the way every other mother of 3 children does day to day.....

Christine worked to challenge the many stereotypes of people with a dementia.....

speaking at national and international conferences, and, with helpful support, writing books in which she charts her journey with Alzheimer's.

In her writing she tells the world from first hand, 'what it is like to have a dementia..... what it is like to live in that strange land.'

She says, ' I am learning the art of losing. Of losing memories; words; names; identities.'

'At some point ,' she says, 'I may lose the word for NO..... and so I might physically hit out if I am being forced to do something or eat something I don't want to.

I want you to make sure I want something before you force it on me.

I may not want to listen to your music..... or play your games..... or eat what YOU want me to eat.....

But I am worthy of dignity and respect.....even if I cannot speak.'

She talks about not being able to recognize people, saying.....

'I am slowly learning to live without remembering labels..... your name or even your face.

Then she pleads, 'But please keep visiting me; even if I might not remember your name or that you are related to me in some way; even if I might not remember that you came yesterday..... and I will forget as soon as soon as you have gone.

The emotion of your visit, the friendly feelings you give me, are far more important..... it is the emotion I connect with.

Isn't that true of all of us?

We are sensitive to negative or positive vibes in a relationship.

It is the emotion we connect with.

The main character in the book, 'Still Alice' a book charting a journey not dissimilar to that of Christine Bryden, asks the question.....

'Are my soul and spirit immune to the ravages of Alzheimer's?'

She answers...'I believe they are.'

And I too believe they are.

And if I do..... and if we as a Christian community do..... then it should impact on us..... and challenge us deeply to consider how we feed and nurture the soul and spirit of a person with a dementia.

We are here today to worship.

As we worship our souls and spirit are being nurtured and fed.

Nurtured and fed by the beauty of this building; by the beauty of the music ;
and by the familiarity of the hymns we sing;

By the sight of flickering candles, and by the beauty and smell of flowers;

and ultimately as we take the love of God into ourselves when we receive the
sacrament.

The soul and spirit of a person with a dementia deserves to be fed in the same
way.

We have this in common.

As I continue to minister to those with a dementia in local residential care
homes I am very conscious of soul and spirit needing to be fed and nourished.

I have worked to change, in small ways, the service of communion that I offer.

Simplifying it, but retaining well remembered parts of it.....

The Lord's prayer and the Collect for purity for example.

I put plants or flowers on the altar table; and candles; and we sing well known
hymns.

It is a joy to see how many of these hymns are still remembered..... when so
much else is lost.

As the people of God we need to find ways of feeding and nurturing the souls
and spirits of those with a dementia..... until their last breath is taken.

That is a real challenge..... but it is one which we and the church at large must
wrestle with.

John Swinton, author of the book, 'Dementia, In the memories of God' when taking part in a radio programme discussing the theological issues surrounding dementia was asked by the programmes host,

'If you had a dementia, how would you like to be treated?'

He admitted to not being sure what to say, but then said,

'From out of nowhere I found myself saying,

If I do get a dementia, I hope I will be loved and cared for just for who I am, even if who I am is difficult for me and for others.'

I would suggest that we might all have that hope 'in common.'

The person with a dementia has hopes and longings.....

To be valued; to be respected; to be treated with dignity;

To be remembered;

To be loved.

And isn't that what you and I want?

For ourselves; for our parents; for our children?

Isn't that everyone's right?

Isn't that what we all have 'in common?'