

Nativity Reflection

'Like a weaned child on its mother's breast.' Ps 130

In the course of my work with the Pastoral Care Project I have been privileged to meet many frail elderly people, many of whom are bearing the illness of dementia. Being with them deepens my awareness of how God reveals his love through them. When these experiences are reflected upon they become a moment of truth and a source of inspiration. I wish to share one such experience with you.

On one occasion, when I was preparing to lead a time of Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in a Care Home, I noticed a resident as she was being accompanied to her seat by a member of staff, the lady seemed slightly agitated, and I noticed she was holding a bundle of clothes under her arm. It is not unusual in itself to see someone with dementia carrying personal items with them.

However, she seemed less agitated when my co-leader began playing the guitar and singing the first hymn. As I stood to read, I noticed the lady's eyes were fixed on me. I had chosen a verse from the gospel of the day John 15. verse 9. As I read, **'As the Father has loved me so I have loved you,'** the lady repeated those words - her eyes still fixed on me; still holding the bundle of clothes under her arm. Sometimes a person with dementia will repeat what the person before them is saying.

The musician followed with the next hymn, the Hail Mary. During the hymn I looked around at the people present as they joined in the singing, but my eyes were drawn back to the lady with the bundle of clothes as she began to unfold them in harmony with the music. She was no longer agitated, she was careful in the way she was handling the clothes; reshaping them and then she then held them close to her, and began rocking as if comforting a child. The shape she had made out of the clothes actually looked like an infant wrapped in a blanket.

What was once a bundle of clothes under her arm now resembled an infant being cradled. She sat contented and when the service was over she rose and walked away with confidence saying 'thank you' to me, with a wonderful smile – a stark contrast to when she first sat down.

The lady was clearly touched by the whole prayer experience. The co-leader and myself were quite overwhelmed at the time and reflected on it afterwards and in the days which followed. It is a reminder that affording people the time and space to engage with all the senses will help them to remember and participate in their faith. This is very important, even more so for anyone who is living with dementia and unable to ask to join in the community worship.

For me this experience is something I cherish and each time I think about it I am still deeply touched, which is why I wish to share it with you. For me I often wonder about what was happening deep within her, was she holding her child, a grandchild or was it totally spiritual; did she feel she was being held by the loving, living God?

I would like to invite you to read and ponder the reflection; the scripture, sing or pray the Hail Mary, and imagine the lady with dementia holding her bundle of clothes.

There are moments when people with dementia are transformed especially when they are singing or receiving holy communion. I hope by sharing this story it will be a source of encouragement for families and those who are apprehensive about pastoral visiting or taking holy communion to the sick.

Please do write or email me if you have a story or reflection you would like to share. Sharing enables a better understanding of the person with dementia so that we may see God's beauty in them.

Best wishes

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