

The Cared-for and their Carers

The Pastoral Care Project's mission to raise awareness of the spiritual needs of the frail elderly and to enable carers to support them in their journey to the fullness of life was inspired by the gospel of Luke 4: 16-1, when the Project began in 1994.

The words '*The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour,*' inspired and challenged us then and continues to inspire and challenge us today. For they remind us that the anointing we received at our baptism is the same for the person now suffering with dementia. So, how can we who are nourished spiritually, especially by taking part in the mass where all our senses are stimulated to receive the Lord, help the person with dementia receive spiritual nourishment? How can we help them to feel less isolated so that, like us, they experience life as members of the Body of Christ?

Over the last twenty years, many teams from the Pastoral Care Project have visited care homes to pray with residents, lead services and provide music ministry. On occasions, the Project would arrange for mass to be offered in the care home. *"It is wonderful to join with lay people and staff who care for the very frail in society. It is so moving - it is a time when all their restlessness and agitation stands still and I am touched by their awareness and response to the Mass."* Fr Arul Samy 2006.

At first, we didn't find it easy going into care homes as there were no preparations made for the residents to pray. We didn't even feel that we were being '*good news to the poor*', but we discovered that it was not the people with dementia who were poor, it was us. We were certain that the service, whether it was prayer or Holy Communion, would begin with the usual noise and busyness, but the prayer time always ended in peace and stillness. What happened in the middle was dictated by those present, like one occasion when a resident asked for forgiveness for she had been ill and felt she had upset the staff and was sorry; but the awareness of the Holy Spirit healing and comforting was very moving and joyous, as told more fully in the following story.

Two of us were leading a service of Holy Communion in a care home in the lead up to Holy Week. The residents were seated around the table set for Holy Communion. Following Holy Communion many of the residents joined in the prayer, towards the end one resident began to cry; he sobbed for a time before sharing why he was crying. The sorrow he felt was because he could no longer go to church and take part in the Easter Services. After a time he felt comforted by the prayers of those present. The residents reached out to him in love and from there a friendship grew so he felt less alone. Two years on, the man moved to a Catholic Care Home and the first thing he said to me when I visited him was that the Lord had heard his cry and now he would be able to go to mass again.

For every resident in a care home there may be a family member at home grieving; coming to terms with relinquishing the caring role - thus feeling isolated and lonely. As one lady said, *"I don't feel I am his wife anymore, just a visitor"* - painful emotions expressed but thankfully over time she has come to know the staff and other residents. She and her husband enjoy the time they spend together in a new way, being together, sharing the love that they had for each other from when they first met, which now continues throughout their married life.

Those who are vulnerable and their carers are very much part of the Pastoral Care Project. One former carer, Michael Cauchi, has written many poems; Michael composed the following poem during a day of reflection on Luke 4.19-19 (Isaiah 61 1-3) and the painting of the *'Washing of the Feet'* by Seiger Koder. This poem is a reminder to us of our own vulnerability but also of the gospel *'to proclaim the Lord's year of favour'* - to share what we have by way of resources, to enable more help to spring up in parishes and care homes. The full reflection of *'The Water of Your Blessing'* can be downloaded from our website www.pastoralcareproject.org.uk and click on the reflection link.

The Water of your Blessing

Do not kneel, My Lord.

It is for me to kneel at your feet.

With your loving hands you touch my feet...

Loving, gentle hands

which made those who ail and hurt whole and well.

You washed my feet with water cool and soothing...

The water of your Blessing.

You dried my feet with linen pure; and gentleness.

But infinitely you washed my heart...

A heart 'oft grieved and saddened.

You drew me close and called me Son,

And filled me with your grace,

Your great Amen.

M. Cauchi 28/3/06



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