

Thinking Lunch – Thursday 7th May 2020

When I needed a neighbour where were you? *How to talk about mental health*

Who would ever have imagined that when we originally agreed to offer our pearls of wisdom to you all at the Thinking Lunch today, we would find ourselves in this situation? Furthermore, who would ever have imagined that the response to this pandemic and lockdown would focus so much our attention on the needs of our neighbours in the way it has done?

Without doubt, this period of lockdown and isolation will have many unintended consequences, including the effect on people's mental wellbeing. As chaplains, we are noticing much higher levels of anxiety in our workplaces for both those able to remain in work and those who have been furloughed. For those whose work involves health and social care, the anxiety of inadvertently passing on the virus to anyone, not least vulnerable people, is as great as contracting the virus themselves and putting their families at risk.

Anxious family members may place pressure on loved ones not to go into work, which compounds the situation. Those who normally appear to embrace all that 'comes their way' instead may be experiencing a fear of dying (even though they remain in good health) as they struggle with their fear of personal control in a situation far bigger than they and indeed any of us, have dealt with ever before. So, what has become clear, is that there is an even greater need to talk with one another about how this situation affects us and to respond.

This situation has also shown us just how vulnerable in one way or another we all are and that we really are in this together. It has also shown us just how closely balanced survival and struggle really are as we experience the changes in our usual patterns of daily living, separation from our families and friends and a lack of a clear and certain future. For some of us, the tables have turned and suddenly we are experiencing what it means to need support both practically and emotionally in a way we have not done so before. What new insights this brings!

It has also been interesting to note how our language has changed during the lockdown. Already, the term 'new normal' is becoming widely used. We're getting used to the idea that Covid-19 is not a short-term blip, but something that will change individual, family and communal lives and relationships for ever.

As Sam Wells (the Vicar of St Martins-in-the-Fields in central London) reflected on a recent *Thought for the Day*, the Hebrew Scriptures record a number of grave national events that had a lasting impact on the whole population. He observed that the prophets spoke into these critical situations. They offered words of comfort and solace. Then, and only then, they advanced a vision of a future that could not be based on going back to the past.

Whatever 'normal' was to be, it would not be the normal the populace had experienced before. It will be a new normal. For, Wells concluded, that is precisely what God offers us each time we face an existential crisis, such as Covid-19; the opportunity to be honest with ourselves and each other, reflect on all we are going through, and work out what we might do for the better in the future.

What is clear to both of us in our chaplaincy roles is just how much the various parts of our lives interact with each other. There is no way that we leave our home life at the threshold of work, and somehow pick it up at the end of our shift; no way that our mental and spiritual wellbeing does not impact on our physical health. It is simply remarkable how many people in the health and social care fields (and others as well) have found the courage to continue working whilst living with the stress, anxiety and trauma of family and friends battling with Covid-19.

That's where neighbours have come in. They appear in all shapes and sizes – work colleagues, delivery drivers, the grumpy person in the flat next door and so on. And, in a crisis such as this, neighbourly roles do not follow the usual patterns. Cleaners listen to managers, children care for parents, health care assistants look out for chaplains. When it comes down to it, we can all be neighbours in a crisis.

The question "Who is my neighbour?" started Jesus off on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37). For the man who was robbed, neighbourliness came from an unlikely source; from someone who should, by all the conventions of the time, have had nothing to do with the victim. Yet Samaritan looked after Jew and God again showed how a new normal could be born.

If all we do right now is to let our mental health emotions, experiences and questions run round our heads, we shall indeed go mad. But being able to name them and talk about them, whether directly, by phone, Zoom or email, reduces their impact on us. It enables us to manage our mental wellbeing. Not everything gets sorted out, but somehow a problem shared really does feel like a problem halved.

Maybe, that's what those Hebrew prophets were trying to get at, 2500 years and more ago. The new normal is that which takes our human experiences, including that of our mental wellbeing, and applies new and healthier ways of dealing with them. Perhaps we need to recognise the Samaritans amongst us, those who do NOT think as we do, and embrace them (adopting appropriate social distancing of course!) for what they can offer us and what we can off them. Then 'them' and 'us' cease to have any meaning as we are all neighbours in the new normal.

Nothing will be lost in this experience; instead it has opened our hearts as we share in the struggle and bear the load. Isn't that exactly what Jesus wanted us to do all along? In the words of John Bell and Graham Maule:

To the lost Christ shows his face;
to the unloved he gives his embrace;
to those who cry in pain or disgrace,
Christ makes with his friends a touching place'.

Prayer:

Risen Christ, for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred: open the doors of our hearts, that we may seek the good of others and walk the joyful road of compassion and peace to the praise of God the Father. Amen.

(Collect from Church of England – Daily Prayer)

Richard Allen's biography

Richard has been involved with mental health work for two decades, initially as a volunteer and, for the last 17 years, as a mental health chaplain within the NHS. He is currently the spiritual care manager at the NHS Trust that provides mental health care across Hertfordshire and beyond.

Sue Stilwell's biography

Sue has been a Chaplain with MHA (Methodist Homes) for 10 years working with people living with dementia and life-limiting illness. Alongside this work, she has been licensed for the last 9 years to the Bishop's Hatfield clergy team in St Albans Diocese. Sue is an Authorised Presbyter with the St Albans and Welwyn Circuit and works with Deacon Linda Kinchenton on the de Havilland Community Project.