

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



## DEMENTIA AWARENESS

14 May 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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A different kind of sermon this morning as we mark dementia awareness Sunday at the beginning of this Alzheimer's Society's dementia awareness week. You'll hear several voices from our dementia-friendly team, and we'll start by introducing you to Memory Boxes. Yvonne will tell you about those.

*The use of memory boxes and other memory stimuli fall within the category of Reminiscence Therapy. According to Dementia UK, Reminiscence Therapy has been shown to stimulate long term memory, and cognition, enabling adults to become more engaged. This can reduce rates of depression and improve the bonds between family and caregivers.*

*Generic memory boxes, similar to the memory wall at West Suffolk Hospital, can be created using small items such as old toys, old kitchen utensils as well as images, or newspaper cuttings of popular culture and events, specific to any historical period.*

*Our family, recently had fun reminiscing with our grandchildren about our memories of a metal hand mincer, which would be bolted like a vice to the kitchen table. As children ourselves, we would sit and watch our parents feed meat into the top of the mincer and then excitedly take turns with the handle, fascinated by the process of changing the meat into mince.*

*At times, conversations with someone whose memory is not as good as it once was, can become awkward and stilted, as relatives, friends and caregivers search for common ground and shared remembered memories.*

*The idea of the memory boxes is to prompt conversations in a relaxed setting, where the person can be encouraged to connect in their own time or to move on to other more meaningful items.*

*Memory boxes, specific to an individual, are ideal. In the early stages of dementia, individuals can be encouraged to choose items to be included in their memory box. Finding comfort in knowing that items which hold special personal memories are included, even though the memories themselves may fade.*

*It should however be noted that while memory boxes can induce a sense of wellbeing and belonging, they can also cause a person to relive unpleasant memories, so it is always important to consider each individual's personal story.*

*Sharing a memory box with someone also has the potential to create new memories, to be treasured by the caregiver, relative or friend....and even if the memory shared appears fleeting, the individual will remember how they felt, long after the relatives or caregivers have gone.*

Our dementia-friendly team are Pam, Margaret, Yvonne, Anita, with Sarah Friswell and Sue Hughes. It's a work in progress, but recent Dementia-friendly progress includes new signage around the Cathedral informed by dementia-friendly advice; a new door mat in the Cathedral Porch; training for staff and volunteers; and the monthly Together on Tuesdays Service which Anita leads. We are thinking about musical possibilities with all the musical resources we have here.

In the Gospel this morning Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments". His commandment is to love one another, so dementia care is an expression of keeping Jesus' commandments: the deep, sacrificial care that dementia care involves, especially in people's homes.

The book "What Dementia Teaches Us About Love" by Nicci Gerrard says this:

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*A powerful tool for carers: "Do something for yourself, every day." "The carer of someone with dementia lives between two grave dangers: of withdrawing in order to protect the self, and of becoming extinguished by the needs of the dependent other. To have one's own life back, if only for a while; to care and yet to psychically survive. How much should one give? Everything? One's whole self? It's always too much; it's never enough."*

*"We have to be able to bear sorrow - not to turn away from it, nor to absorb it or enter into it, but to bear it. Sorrow is a heavy weight." The CEO of the Tavistock Centre for Couples Relationships, Andrew Balfour ... "Carers need support if they are to remain emotionally available. If, for instance, you are screamed at over and over again, you need help to tolerate how that makes you feel." "I meet carers who are humorous, optimistic, tender and unresentful, who would regard their task as a difficult privilege, something given to them, but who have nevertheless become depressed, ill, angry, poor, chaotic, flattened, trapped, heartbroken, utterly undone and at the end of their tether; they feel that they can't go on and still they go on. And on and on and on." "There are hundreds of thousands of them, not saints but ordinary people you too often struggle on alone.." "There's the carer's perpetual dilemma: how much to hold onto the old world, the independent self, and how much to relinquish that in order to be kind, to be loyal, to keep the relationship alive, to care."*

Sue Hughes has been Co-Chair of Suffolk Dementia Action Partnership. Sue highlights the many good initiatives around our county. So that we are starting to speak about dementia with more confidence. In Suffolk we have a shared vision that "People living with dementia and their carers in Suffolk will have the best opportunities to be safe and well and continue to live an active life of their choosing within an informed community that supports, includes and values them."

Some great things happening in Suffolk:- a care home welcoming residents with pets. supported golf at Seckford, singing classes, dementia friendly screenings of films, dementia friendly performances- Seagull Theatre at Lowestoft is exceptional, tea dances, bowls, health walks, Memory Cafes, Dementia Action Alliance groups, Ipswich Town FC v supportive with regular groups, Dance East classes in Felixstowe & Ipswich, Britten Pears arts classes E Suffolk

Things that help are Arts, culture, music, smaller quieter groups, animal companionship, robot pets (yes, really), dancing, singing, technology, reminiscence including conversations & photos

We'll end with Margaret reading A Prayer for Sylvia. Margaret was a dementia-carer for her husband.

Dear Lord,  
Please grant my visitors tolerance of my confusion.  
Forgiveness of my irrationality and strength to walk with me  
into the mist of memory my world has become.  
Please help them to take my hand and stay awhile,  
even though I seem unaware of their presence.  
Help them to know how their strength and loving care

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will drift softly into the days to come -  
just when I need it most.  
Let them know that when I don't recognize them,  
I will ask them to keep their hearts free of sorrow for me  
for my sorrow, when it comes, only lasts for a moment and then it is gone.  
And finally, Lord, please let them know how very much their visits mean,  
How, even through this relentless mystery  
I can feel their love.  
Amen