

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



DEMENTIA AWARENESS SUNDAY

12 May 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon and Rev Anita Rooney

In this sermon you'll hear from me and from Anita.

I'm grateful for insights from John Swinton and his book on Dementia and God.¹

And I will be sharing experiences of people in our community who have cared for people with dementia.

What time is it? How long will this sermon be? Will the service finish in time for my next thing? If only I had more time! A few more hours in the day would help with all the tasks I have! Our culture treats time as another commodity: "you spend time, buy time, waste time, use time, keep time, and lose time."² Our society prioritises productivity and efficiency and outcomes. "Many of us spend much of our lives at war with time. Time rules us and dictates the nature and shape of our lives and our relationships."³ As a consequence we often treat other people as commodities. Time is often "our enemy rather than our friend".⁴ Today, we remember another way. We can live as friends of time.

A number of circumstances reminded him of his early life when he lived at home with his parents in Sheffield. For instance, on our walks (he in his wheelchair), we would pass a row of terrace houses and these would remind him of a similar house he lived in as a boy with his parents and he was convinced that his Father still lived there. During these conversations the present had no meaning, the past was the present for him and could be very vivid.

She stayed in her room in the care home, but she used to think that the corridors of the house were the barracks in wartime, when she would drive wounded soldiers around.

We have a tendency to think that caring for someone means doing things for them. Our culture tends to view unplanned time as empty time. This leads us to feel that just being with someone with advanced dementia is meaningless and purposeless. Athena McLean has written about people with dementia in care homes. "The most dedicated caregiver I ever met was able to overcome the constraints of clock time". In her care for residents, "caring was moral and spiritual ..., meaningful in and of itself. Motivated by a faith in the divinity of the person that remained. ... Care to her was ... part and parcel of the sanctity of life as lived. It derived from a sense of identity and belonging with the resident, and with something greater."⁵ "When we engage with a person who has severe dementia, as we learn to be present with [them], body and soul in the sacredness of the moment, new life and fresh possibilities are born and nurtured. Our time is used well, even if the recognition of that moment may be brief and passing."⁶

¹ John Swinton, Dementia – Living in the Memories of God

² Swinton p.229

³ Ibid

⁴ p.230

⁵ p.234

⁶ p.235

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*“They would wake up to find him gone, he would leave the house believing it to be the morning and wonder in to the city on his own, very confused not able to make his way back home. This continued to be of serious concern until he was given a watch with a tracker, which meant that they could safely find him.”
He had no memory of his working life, his first wife - who died of cancer - or his three sons. In the past he had a very close relationship with them, and they would constantly refer to him for advice.*

On his 80th birthday we had a party for him. He had no idea what this meant but his family - his sons and their wives, his sister and brother-in-law and others - were there. He tried to understand the relevance of the day - the fact that he was 80 meant nothing to him. but he did want to understand who they were and why they were there and something he asked me was "Are they my people" which I think showed he had some understanding.

One more example for this morning comes from a professor in California. His wife had severe multiple sclerosis and had lost the ability to move and speak. Different to dementia, but providing insight for caring. The professor used to invite his students to his home to have pancakes with his wife. “She probably won’t remember you afterwards, but in that moment she will appreciate you.” The professor had learned to meet with her in the moment, and he wanted others to share that moment. It might only be a moment, but the moment mattered. And it mattered that other people were there to witness it. The professor wrote about this. “It can seem now as if Ann is almost gone ... There is so little of her here now. In her [earlier] disability, Ann exercised her ministry to people, even though I [didn’t know] how it worked.” But now with further decline, how can she exercise that ministry? A care giver answered John’s uncertainty. She had not known Ann before she was severely disabled. “No,” she said, “Ann’s spirit ministers to my spirit.”⁷

This insight helped John Swinton in his care giving for people with advanced dementia. “By being there, I was doing something. I was holding them. I knew their names. I was them in the present moment.”⁸ “And God is in the present moment.”⁹

“In his final years, my father taught me patience and perseverance, resilience, and control. I learnt more about his life through the slipstreams of stories muddled by dementia and seasoned through time.... And throughout, his deep faith never wavered.”

Almost until the end of his life I would regularly take him to Services, in our village church and After, he went to a care home, which had a short monthly Service - very similar to our "Together on Tuesdays" Services. He had been part of a church throughout his life, he had played the organ and sung in choirs, music had always been an important part of his life and he did have some memory of the words and music to the hymns. “These were almost the last memories he had and I like to think that if you have faith in God in your life, then TIME becomes irrelevant.”

⁷ p.236

⁸ p.237

⁹ p.256