

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER / DEMENTIA AWARENESS

18 May 2025

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Sermon by the Reverend Canon Alan Forsdike

Greetings to you all. I am Alan Forsdike, currently Bishop's Chaplain at Park Road Ipswich along with my wife Catherine. I joke that she is the front half of the chaplain and I take up the rear; we are not really a pantomime horse! This is the fifth week of a bit of an Easter tour we are taking around the diocese. I come here today not to make any announcement about a new Bishop – at Park Road we are in as much darkness as you!

No, today I'm here at the invitation of the cathedral because today marks the start of a week of Dementia Awareness and I have the privilege of chairing the Diocesan Disability and Inclusion Group. Perhaps you didn't know such a thing existed! Catherine and I were instrumental in setting it up alongside Archdeacon Jeanette a few years back. In Britain, the latest estimates from the government's Family Resources Survey indicate that 16.8 million people in the UK had a disability in the last financial year. This represents 25% of the total population. About 95% of us will experience a kind of disability at some time during our life. The most common are loss or reduction in hearing and sight, then reduced mobility; but the list is much longer and more complex. If you became disabled and wanted to continue attending your church, how easy would that be? In this diocese, we celebrate the inclusion, contribution, and ministry of disabled people, acknowledging that the church community is only complete when all are welcome. If something is 'accessible', everyone can use it without discrimination. Accessibility therefore applies to everything – for example, projected and printed material, the physical building, the way we talk and so on can all help (or hinder) people. We should aim to help everyone feel welcome and valued and included (inclusive) and avoid anyone feeling ignored or left out (discriminated against). That's why the D&I Group that I chair was set up and – just to fly the flag – there is a whole host of information on the diocesan website about a vast range of disabilities. We are slowly gaining traction and have representation on the DAC and beyond as we seek to fulfil our aim – God's aim – of making the church community whole.

Catherine and I both have history from our secular work lives of making buildings and services (not church services) accessible to people with disabilities. The range of potential disabilities is enormous and of course we can have more than one! I broke my right femur in December 2023 and experienced at first-hand what it was to move in a wheelchair and on a pair of crutches – what it was to be limited in mobility – what it was to suffer daily pain and discomfort. But disability is not just about physical things. About 95% of us will experience disability at some time during our life as I said earlier. There are many hidden disabilities like learning difficulties, cognitive impairments, chronic illnesses and mental health disorders.

Let me focus in on one of the latter – the hidden disability of dementia. There are more than 850,000 people with dementia in the UK. That's a staggering figure. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands but I'm pretty certain that almost everyone here has some experience of that, be it through a friend or family member. You will know very keenly what effect it has on you and the

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person who has developed dementia. You will know how a person's memory is affected, how their personality changes. I first experienced dementia when my grandmother developed it – that was fifty years ago. Since then, I've seen it many times since particularly as my ministry has taken me into care homes. Just at the moment, I am living through close family experience – Catherine's father has developed it. This is a person who ran a successful business, was intimately involved in the Rotary movement, several charities and his local church as Churchwarden. Before Covid he was, at the age of 86, still practicing as an optician part of the week. Now, he is alone, permanently in bed on the ground floor of his large home – living in one room needing carers three times a day – most of the day he is asleep – he is unable to stand or walk – and, despite his almost total loss of hearing, he's convinced that someone is singing carols in his bed and wants it to stop. He is asking for his driving licence to be renewed because he wants to buy a new car, but he has forgotten why he had to give it up. He is convinced his former business partners are selling the business and don't understand the lease arrangements on the properties. It's a sad state of affairs; distressing and upsetting and disturbing for the family who want him to be the avuncular, vibrant and active man he was two years ago. He always knew his own mind but now he could not be more difficult if he tried - he flatly refuses to be moved from home to a place where he would have stimulation and better care because, in his mind, there is nothing wrong with him. But he is still a child of God.

From our Psalm (which incidentally is entitled 'The Inescapable God'): 'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' We cannot change the situation. We cannot respond to his apparently irrational behaviour or demands with reasoning – it will not work. To him what he thinks and says and wants is real - so arguing will confuse him more. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made - but God understands. That Psalm also says: 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.' What a reassurance. That psalm emphasizes God's knowledge and care for every individual, including those living with dementia, highlighting that 'even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you'.

I've taken services in care homes for more years than I care to remember. There are always people there who are living with dementia. I'm always touched by the effect singing familiar hymns has on them. It reminds me that inside those jangled memories God's truth and love still resides. I'm minded of the lady who, probably because she was not given the opportunity to move away, found herself sitting in front of me month after month totally unresponsive or distracted – sometimes speaking out. She was mostly silent ... until I recited the Lord's Prayer. It affected me deeply when those firmly set lips relaxed and began to move with the words – words she doubtless learned as a child. A lost connection was re-established even though it was probably transient.

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Then there was, June – whom I had known for 50 years. Shut away in a world of her own, she would acknowledge me on arrival with a smile and, “Oh hello dear” but by this time the only person she recognised was her husband of 70-odd years. June would take a hymn book each time and, if helped to the right page, she would join in the words of a familiar hymn.

Let me remind you of today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. ‘I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Those verses offer comfort and remind us that God's love transcends even the challenges of dementia, assuring us that those affected are not beyond His reach.

People with dementia need to feel they are accepted and are a part of the church. I always say hello to people with dementia even if I think they cannot remember me. If they seem confused I’m not afraid of reminding them who I am. Extending a handshake can also help them feel welcome and valued. It’s reassuring to have something familiar when the world is now confusing.

This cathedral has grasped this issue and holds a monthly service called ‘Together on Tuesday’ for people who might find a service like this one too long, but who still want to sing something familiar; to praise God in a way which is comfortable and relatable. One such service was held last Tuesday at 2pm. These services are particularly friendly and informal suiting those with dementia and their carers. Verses 34 and 35 from our Gospel could not be more apt – by God’s grace it is the reading set for today... ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ We must not forget the effect dementia has on those who support and care; they need to be loved also. Those verses reinforce the call to love one another, to encourage compassion and support for individuals with dementia (and their families) by reminding us that Jesus said, ‘as I have loved you, so you must love one another’. Amen.