

## SERMON

*Debbie Thrower, Licensed lay minister and founder of Anna Chaplaincy for Older People*

We've always known the word 'church' encompasses many more people than happen to congregate in a church building. The fact that people living in care can also worship, thanks to the teams of people who regularly visit care homes and lead such worship, testifies to that.

But with the onset of coronavirus those worshippers have been denied the sorts of services they might have grown accustomed to, the ones taking place in the lounge, (other people being brought Home Communion, say, in their room, if they can't walk or are confined to bed).

We have one Anna Chaplain who regularly rings individuals in her local care home. Elizabeth Bryson in Maidstone, in Kent, conducts a mini service with one person after another, on the phone. She's been doing this throughout the health crisis. She's helped by an Activities Coordinator who takes a mobile phone from person to person, carefully sanitising it between each one, I'm sure. While Elizabeth reads them a Bible passage, sings a short hymn (she's very unself-conscious about that), she offers prayers and thanksgivings to God, and includes any personal prayers that a resident might want said for someone who's especially on their hearts that day.

It is a hugely rewarding ministry, she says, and it's time consuming as she might reach twenty individuals in a single day: carefully repeating God's Word and making it special, unique, to that person at that time. Otherwise they wouldn't have had worship that day, or on any day?

We're all having to adapt to new circumstances and that means people who are often in the older age bracket themselves are learning how to conduct a service via Skype, or on Zoom, rather than face to face. Or they're recording a short 'Thought for the day' and posting it on YouTube for the home to select and show at a convenient time in the care home day.

Ironically, many more people might be seeing such filmed 'conversation starters' (such as the ones, on topics like hugs, the seaside, anxiety and prayer, recorded by an 80 year old Anna Chaplain who specialises in ministry among those living with dementia) since they've appeared on the web she's being viewed by many more people than she'd ever have reached by visiting the dementia wing of her local care home and meeting up with the typical eight to ten people she normally sees on a weekly basis?

These women, and men, who are becoming Anna Chaplains, are what you might call our present day 'Annas' and 'Simeons', people who are seeing with the eyes of God, who spot the people who are on the margins, reading the signs of the times, just as Simeon and Anna did that day in the Temple when God disclosed to them that that young couple, looking like so many others through the doors day after day, they were the ones, carrying the Messiah and this was an extraordinary day in history, the history of the whole world.

The saviour had come in the form of a tiny helpless baby. Let's never forget how God uses the seemingly weak to teach us things. In Luke's account, Simeon utters his famous prayer, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes hath seen your salvation', and it is Anna, the prophetess, the one who's so good at spotting those hovering just on the edge of sight, and drawing them in.

She it is, who steps into the limelight and speaks of God's love, of the redemption of Israel, that was to set in train the redemption of each one of us.

She not only speaks good news, she does something about it, there in the shadows of the Temple precincts, on the fringes of society.

No wonder we picked the name Anna for this work among older people and their carers who often feel overlooked and forgotten, and who at this time in our contemporary history have borne the brunt of a disease which in some cases ought never to have been brought close to them, infection to which they should not have been exposed. But this is not the place to point the finger of blame.

We shall all learn to handle such a virus better in future. We must improve conditions for our older people in care so they can be supported and remain connected to other people and to those aspects of life which bring meaning and purpose to their lives. For many people in care that includes faith, the articulation of their spirituality, which makes their life feel worth living.

We have all learnt over recent months, when deprived of company how much our loved-ones matter to us. How sad it is when people are alone for long periods and feel acute loneliness. Our hearts ache for families meeting through fences, relatives and residents separated on health grounds. We applaud the pastoral care that's seen church services taking place in care home gardens, under gazebos.

There have been other ingenious ways of keeping in touch apart from letters and cards, 'doorstep pop rounds'. I know one chaplain who takes a shooting stick with her and perches outside someone's house for a chat. Another effectively patrols the fence of a care home when out walking, saying she daren't miss her daily walk because she finds residents waiting there just in case she passes by. The residents are desperate for someone to talk to. The onset of winter presents more challenges though.

We trust that where there is love and concern these challenges will be surmountable. One of the saddest things I heard recently was a minister telling me how he'd rung a parishioner who was home alone, shielding from the virus, and she'd said to him: 'Will I ever see another human being again before I die?'

This conversation had a profound effect on him, and he had joined one of our Zoom conference calls in order to hear more about what resources are available for ministering to older people through the pandemic. We had 97 people enrol for that conference, all of them wanting to know more, some eager to share their novel ideas and good practice. There's a real appetite for more ministry among older people, and in particular among those living in care homes. God is raising up the right people, volunteering for such ministry, many of them in what we'd describe as the older age category themselves.

We have 150 Anna Chaplaincy network members and counting, dotted across the country; from Orkney to the Channel Islands, in Wales, in the Midlands, the South West, on the South coast, in the North West and North East, and initiatives like ours and others: Embracing Age, Faith in Later Life, Linking Lives UK, the Salvation Army, the Pilgrims' Friend Society to name but a few, have all come together to be part of a coalition called: 'Christians Together Against Loneliness'. We are all part of a movement working to ensure that fewer people are overlooked or forgotten. No one should be so old they become effectively invisible; out of sight and out of mind. No one must be beyond the reach of a church built on Christ's example of seeking out the lost and the lonely.

Many of those volunteering have seen their own parents through old age and witnessed how other residents in care homes were barely visited. One manager when asked how many people received a regular visit, say at least once a week, said that of her fifty residents, only five, (just ten per cent), received a weekly visit or more. Imagine that multiplied across the country and that's a lot of loneliness. But where people are visited it makes an enormous difference. Love is the great motivator of those reaching out to people in care. How do we keep the engine of such motivation going?

Well, older Christians speak of how reading the Bible fuels their faith, the stories, the writings, give voice to the faith of our forebears. We follow in their faithful steps. What we spend our time focusing on will determine the sorts of people we become, shapes our characters. As St Paul says, 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'

Jesus himself asked so often of the people he met, 'What do you want me to do for you?'. The church we are shaping to be fit for the future (the virus is part of the forces shaping it) may be less about using words and more about demonstrating practical concern, concern not just for churchgoers but for all.

A (now-retired) Church of England bishop, Robert Paterson, once said: 'it's the gestures, the actions, of a redeemed life that get through. If Christians are to communicate the Gospel effectively, our words will have to be sparing and follow, rather than precede, our actions.' That bears repeating, he said: 'if Christians are to communicate the Gospel effectively, our words will have to be sparing and follow, rather than precede, our actions.'

Love, pray, act, is what it comes down to.

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In that spirit our prayers of intercession today are led, from Kent, by BRF's Anna Chaplain 'Church Lead', Julia Burton-Jones, and the Revd Colin Terry who leads the Anna Chaplaincy Team for the Heart of Kent Hospice, based in the communities of Maidstone, Aylesford, Tonbridge and Malling.