

We asked one of our RHC regulars, who works in Mental Health, to share something with us of his experience in the light of the current pandemic. Here is his challenging and thoughtful response.

Dementia and Covid-19: Caring in a Crisis

When the spread of Covid-19 became serious enough to require a national lockdown, I was working with a Memory Assessment Service as a nurse. Our service assesses people who are experiencing memory and other cognitive problems. If they are diagnosed with a form of dementia, they receive medication when appropriate, and post-diagnostic and family support if they want it. The service was deemed non-essential and many of my team were redeployed to other areas of the NHS. Those of us who remained have had to manage patient care within a significantly reduced service with no new assessments being completed and no face-to-face contact unless there is no other option. The upshot of this has been over two months of telephone conversations with patients and their families trying to help them as best we can.

For many people with dementia and their families, the last three months has been extremely difficult. For those with a loved one in 24hr care, it has meant a complete lack of physical contact resulting in emotional distress for both parties. There is a very real dread that loved ones will die during the pandemic, that valuable time together has been irrevocably lost and that final goodbyes won't be possible.

For those living at home with a dementia sufferer, a difficult situation has been made many times worse. There is anecdotal evidence that during lockdown, many people's emotions have been far closer to the surface and are more easily 'triggered' due to the unusual circumstances they're coping with. Someone with dementia who is unable to understand why they can't go out, can't retain the explanation they have been given, or who has difficulty controlling their emotions due to organic changes to the brain will have to express the resulting frustration and anxiety in some other way. This often takes the form of verbal and physical aggression.

Relatives of dementia sufferers living alone in their own home and who are reliant on their family have the stressful task of weighing up the risks of reducing important physical and emotional care with inadvertently bringing Covid-19 into a vulnerable loved one's home. The human brain thrives on stimulation and a story which I frequently hear is that people living alone with dementia have deteriorated at an increased rate since lockdown was implemented.

Search online and there is a plethora of articles, books and YouTube videos explaining and discussing where God is in the Covid-19 epidemic. Some find this approach to a perceived challenge to the Christian faith helpful - especially when debating atheists who see the current situation as one more nail in God's coffin. No doubt this approach has its place, but I also think that the current situation lends its support to important areas of Christian belief and practice. One such area is the view that we are physical creatures, living in a material universe which, while fallen, is fundamentally good. Thomas Aquinas argued that the human soul could not be

accounted for by material causes and would survive physical death. However, he stressed that the soul wasn't a complete thing in itself and that a human person was only complete when he or she was a unity of body and soul. There is a very simple reason why lack of physical contact with others has had such a profoundly negative effect on so many people. We are physical creatures. We were created to be with each other in a physical way. The sheer solidity of our bodies provides physical and emotional reassurance of contact, connection and solace with another individual which immaterial souls on their own cannot. God's declaration in Genesis that "It's not good for man to be alone" isn't just relevant to having a spouse or partner. The deterioration in people's well-being mentioned earlier has coincided with increased time alone for many people - without access to Memory Cafes, day care, luncheon clubs and other social groups. It's probably fair to say that the impact the loss of these services would have wasn't appreciated at the start of the pandemic.

When Christ told his listeners to "Consider the lilies of the field", the word "consider" appears to mean more than to simply "look at". A closer translation might be "contemplate" or "meditate on". Christ is telling us to pay deep attention to the lilies and understand their significance. One of the worries of working within a reduced service is the many practical things we can no longer do to help and support people, whether it's changing medication (because we can't monitor it closely enough for it to be safe), organising respite and day care, or simply increasing the frequency of our visits. The heartening upside of this has been the way that telephone support has made a very real difference to people with dementia and their families. Often there is nothing which can be done practically to solve their problems, but to some extent that is beside the point. A phone call where people feel "considered", listened to, understood, and their significance acknowledged, can make a very real difference.

Finally, the need for a retreat! Whether we see ourselves as religious, spiritual or neither of these, to a greater or lesser extent we often require the time and space to mentally regroup, reassess our selves, our priorities or simply practise a bit of self-care. When Memory Assessment Services were set up across the UK, one of their remits was to ensure that family members who care for people with dementia weren't forgotten. An important part of this support is providing respite, day care and befriending services for those with dementia. This enables family members to take a break from their role and have some time for themselves. That recognised need for space and time to focus on themselves may be some way from the rigours of the Desert Fathers or Jesus' time in the wilderness, but it is a recognition (even if not explicitly acknowledged) that we all have an inner life which requires attention and care. It has sometimes been pointed out that Christ's injunction to love our neighbour as ourselves is in effect two commandments. It is not hard to find very poor examples of self-love - both in the media and in our own lives, but love of self need not be narcissistic or even self-indulgent. It can simply spring from a healthy recognition that we have an intrinsic value and are worth caring for.

Peace

To this house;
To those who enter;
To those who dwell here;
To those who depart.

Peace