

Outreach as Mission

Jeremy Cain, 13.3.19

Sometimes we can do something extraordinary without even knowing it. I was reminded of this after speaking to a woman who volunteers at Joe's Place, the Gateshead drop-in for homeless people. She's been doing it a while so has got to know the people who use the service quite well. One morning, as she was arriving for her shift, she stopped to chat to the younger regulars who tend to sit on the steps of the parish centre where the drop-in is based. In the course of the conversation, she learned that one of them was due in court that afternoon for offences related to his drug addiction. Concerned for him and the impact this might have on his already chaotic life, she instinctively offered to pray for him. The young man was obviously startled and, at first, she thought she might have offended him; but, in fact, his response was the opposite: no-one had ever prayed for him before and he was moved by the fact that anyone should care enough to offer.



There are many things you could take from this story but, for me, it's about the power of spontaneous compassion and openness with your faith. It's impossible to say what long-term impact that offer of prayer- and the prayer itself- had on the young man, as well as on the people he was with; yet I find it easy to believe that even this brief interaction may have planted a seed of hope in him. Of course, there are no guarantees that the seed will grow but just the fact that it's there will make a difference, no matter how small.

As Christians, this matters to us for two reasons. Firstly, when we show our concern for anyone we are living out Jesus' call to love our neighbour. Secondly, when we share some of our faith in the process, we're involving Jesus, alive and well, and living in all of us; and the results might just be

startling. Think of the widow of Nain in Luke's gospel: Jesus' compassion is spontaneous and his immediate response, "Don't cry", is the sort of thing we could all say. And then he brings her son back to life...

Joe's Place is just one example of what I call Outreach as Mission, and it's something a group of us in Hexham and Newcastle are trying to encourage more people to get involved with. It's part of the diocese's mission to "share the good news and grow as disciples of Jesus in faith, and living in loving service of others."

To understand what we're hoping to do, the word *Outreach* needs a bit of unpacking. Clearly it's about going out somehow, beyond the people we know, beyond our parishes, beyond our comfort zones. As Pope Francis said just before he was elected, "The Church is called to come out of itself and go to the margins, not only geographical, but also in human terms, where the mystery of sin, pain, injustice and ignorance dwells, where there is contempt for religious and for religious thinking, and where there is all kinds of misery." That might sound terrifying but we don't need to do this all at once and we don't need to do it alone.

But what do we do when we get there? Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel gives us a good answer, a list of actions which the Church has traditionally called the Corporal Works of Mercy: feed the hungry; give water to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; visit the sick; visit the imprisoned; ransom the captive; bury the dead. But this only addresses the symptoms; we must also address the causes, so actively campaigning for social change is essential.

This is the insight that underpins Tyne and Wear Citizens, a grass-roots community organisation, largely funded by our diocese, which is currently changing the way local decision makers think about child poverty, mental health, and safety in our cities. Their collaborative campaigning work perfectly embodies what Pope Francis must have been thinking of when he said, "Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not by the sum of individual good deeds" (*Laudato Si'*, 219).



John and Polly at Justice and Peace Newcastle Refugee Project

The other two words in our name are also significant: *As Mission* reminds us that we do this in faith, to show God's love in action and allow people to encounter the transformative power of Jesus; this isn't just pious talk, Jesus can and does help people lift their lives out of despair. So our compassionate actions must also be accompanied by words of hope- the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is good news for everyone in practical terms as well as spiritual. It's important that we do this

at the right time, in the right ways and with the right words, but the Joe's Place story above shows how this can come naturally when we're open to the possibilities.

Some of you may have been at Proclaim 15, the national conference about evangelization held in Birmingham four years ago. Of all the talks I heard that day, the thing that most sticks in my memory is the address by Cardinal Nichols in which he suggested the Corporal Works of Mercy as a fruitful means of evangelisation: "When given, they [the Corporal Works of Mercy] are never forgotten and often lead a person on the pathway to Christ." More recently, this has been echoed by Bishop Robert Barron: "striving for justice can indeed be a door to evangelization. What attracted so many people in the first and second centuries to take a look at Christianity was none other than the Church's obvious care for the sick, the homeless, and the poor: 'How these Christians love one another!'"

So that, in a nutshell, is what we mean by Outreach as Mission. As I say, there's a group of us keen to promote it, currently made up of representatives from the Justice and Peace Coordinating Council, the SVP, CAFOD, Joe's Place and the diocese. Our hope is to do this by:

- Raising awareness about social outreach issues within the diocese.
- Engaging with Partnerships to encourage them to develop their social outreach activities.
- Identifying opportunities for collaboration between different groups both inside and outside the Church, and working to foster fruitful partnerships.

There's a lot of good work going on already but we'd love there to be more, so if you can help us, or you think we can help you, please get in touch; have a look at the box below for ways you can get involved. It's by working together that we can make things happen.