

## FATHER ANDY WRITES: SEVENTH BLOG

Most of my mental health hospital commitments during the coronavirus pandemic are through working from home, which mainly involves making telephone phone calls to staff and patients and writing reports. I would only visit a ward if it is absolutely essential, i.e. when a patient refuses to talk on the phone, but needs to talk to a chaplain urgently, or if someone at the hospice is in need of a priest for end of life sacraments. I am responsible for the spiritual and religious care for various wards at Swallownest Court and Woodlands in Rotherham and I offer staff and patients support on a regular basis. Two of my staff colleagues have been inflicted with the coronavirus. Charles, a staff nurse, fell ill a few weeks ago displaying symptoms of the virus and so self-isolated for two weeks. He told me that he thought he was having a heart-attack at one stage and though he was not hospitalised, he said he had never felt as bad as that in his whole life! Charles became very withdrawn and low in mood, almost opposite to his natural self. However, Charles is now back on the ward, laughing and joking once again and with much gratitude, especially for my prayers!

Martin, who is manager on a PICU ward (Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit), has had a cough that seemed to have started long before the coronavirus outbreak, but eventually it developed into something more sinister and he was admitted to hospital where he was treated for the virus. Thank the Lord he is home now and will probably be off work for a few weeks during his recovery. The staff are very appreciative of the chaplaincy support for themselves and for the patients.

There is no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic has created a weird way of living for many of us, but there are some equally weird reactions to how to tackle the virus. In India, politicians from the ruling Hindu nationalist party tout cow urine as a cure for Covid-19. In Tanzania the president has promised that taking holy communion in church would "burn" the virus away. In Brazil a congressman claimed a day of fasting would halt the spread. Not only do these sound somewhat crazy, but they are actually making things worse. The "Cow urine parties" in India have gathered hundreds of people together to drink the liquid and Narayan Chatterjee, an organiser for the ruling Bharatiya Janata party, was arrested for planning a cow urine consumption contest, as it brought large crowds together. Similarly in Tanzania, the president John Magufuli halted all flights, closed schools and shops, but urged people to visit churches and mosques to pray away the disease, telling people that "Covid-19 cannot survive in the body of Christ, it will burn...." he told a full church, "That's why I did not panic while I was taking holy communion." So much for social distancing!

I love the story of the woman in Italy, near Rome who was fined by the Italian police while walking her pet tortoise. She argued that, just like a dog-owner, she was out exercising her pet and at the same time taking some exercise herself. The judge announced that the exercise was non-essential as the tortoise could have been exercised in her own back yard; as far as the exercise for the woman was concerned, he declared it was non-existent!

However, there was one amazing morsel of sanity that not only gave me hope, but touched my heart during this reflective time. On Good Friday evening, rather than watch something on television that was purely for entertainment, I came across a DVD called the Red Balloon; it sounded familiar, but I was sure that I had not watched it before. It was a short French film from 1956. At first I was not convinced that it would be an appropriate choice of viewing for a Good Friday meditation, but it turned out to be a beautiful reflection on the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

It started off with a boy of about nine or ten years old walking to school one morning. He spots a red balloon tangled up at the top of a lamppost. He climbs up to rescue it; and with it being full of helium he holds on to it tightly, so it doesn't fly away. When catching the bus

to school, the bus conductor does not let him get on with the balloon, so he runs with the balloon to get to the school on time. Before entering the school, he asks someone to look after his balloon until the end of the lessons. But when he gets home, his mother has no time for these games and sets the balloon free out of the front door. However, the balloon rises up to the boy's bedroom window and hovers outside before he once more reclaims his beloved balloon.

The boy soon learns that somehow the balloon follows his instructions and he would tell it to wait for him when he goes into a shop or when he's getting on a bus, he is confident that the balloon will follow him – and so it does.

Then one day a group of older boys begin to plague the boy with the red balloon but he manages to elude and outfox them by letting the balloon go, knowing that the balloon will follow him, and once again his balloon flies safely to his bedroom window. The next day after telling the balloon to wait for him outside a shop, he goes in to buy a pastry, and while he does these older boys capture the balloon and run off with it. The boy follows in pursuit and chases them into an open, barren area. The boy tries to retrieve the balloon, but now there are about 20 boys and they turn on him and bully him. In the meantime other boys are catapulting the balloon and eventually the balloon begins to deflate, it is getting smaller and smaller, sinking slowly to the ground. Then one of the bullies stamps his foot on the balloon as if to make sure that it "dead". The balloon squashed to a pulp, was spread out like a pool of blood.

The camera then focuses on lots of other children carrying balloons and suddenly the balloons start flying away out of their hands, and then balloons in shops and people's homes seem to escape and come flying up in the air, as if they were being beckoned by the "dead" red balloon. The colours were multiple - red, yellow, green, blue, orange, white and purple. Hundreds of coloured balloons flew over the town and then began to descend where the boy was grieving over his beloved "dead" balloon. But his mourning soon turned to joy when he saw all the balloons coming down together in such glorious colours. Excitedly, he captures one after another until he holds every single balloon in his hands. Full of joy, the boy is suddenly lifted off the ground and taken up into the air, going higher and higher reaching as far as the clouds. A glorious symbolic, resurrection story and a sheer delight.

PS "The back of his anorak was leaping up and down, and people were chucking money to him. I said, 'Do you earn a living doing that?'" He said, "Yes, this is my livelihood."

"Doctor Doctor, I can't stop stealing!" "Have you taken anything for it?"

So I went to the dentist. He said, "Say Aaah." I said, "What for?" He said, "My dog's died."

What happens if you eat yeast and shoe polish?  
Every morning you rise and shine!

My dad works almost every day. He almost works on Monday, he almost works on Tuesday, he almost works on Wednesday.....