

Fr Andy's Reflection for the feast of the Ascension and it is also mental health awareness week.  
BE KIND"

During this pandemic we have seen quite a fair share of people behaving badly, not least among others some of our world male leaders, a typical example of men behaving badly. But they are not alone. In the US alone, we have seen protestors with guns in Michigan's capital demanding an end to lockdown, anti-vaxxer women in a frenzy at California's capitol, opportunists stockpiling hand sanitisers to resell for profit. People panic buying, grabbing more than they need and thinking of no one except themselves. Others flouting social distancing measures and ignoring simple rules.

However, this is not how people normally behave. Historical disasters reveal that the majority of people in times of crisis and disaster behave in ways that are anything but selfish. Underneath the ordinariness of everyday life disasters and times of crisis reveal an amazing amount of creative and generous altruism. In this coronavirus pandemic we have witnessed a global surge of emphatic impulses from all kinds of people which are making a considerable difference.

Though various charities have suffered during this crisis, so have many others, including 36 million American people who are now unemployed. The many businesses that have gone bust and the untold suffering that the virus has caused. But we should not forget that our empty streets, our closed schools and churches, our shops, our pubs, our restaurants and cafe bars, are – a withdrawal carried out by billions for the benefit of the communities in which they live, as well as for their own safety. At the beginning of this crisis we withdrew from the spaces where we shared out solidarity; we moved apart to come together (as demonstrated every Thursday evening at 8.00pm in clapping our key workers). We purposely produced, in the form of business and school shutdowns and staying at home, an unprecedented economic calamity as an alternative to accepting mass death.

Even when some businesses were able to remain open such as restaurants for take away services etc, some people would put up a notice saying, "It is in the best interest of our employees, our customers, our community to keep our building closed at this time." By just staying at home even though for some it is financial ruin, there has been an incredible public sacrifice at work. In March, the NHS called for 250,000 volunteers to sign up to help the elderly, people who were self-isolating and medical staff who needed deliveries. More than three times that many signed up!

There has been a surge of people helping others with shopping, picking up medication, donating phones for people in hospital, laptops for kids who need them to access home leaning and cars for healthcare staff redeployed to places in most need. The list is endless.

As I walk down my road for my daily walk I pass a house which simply says on one of its windows, "Be Kind", a recurring message in 2020. Kindness is more than mere sentiment; real kindness and concern require us to understand how the other person came to think and feel they way they do, no matter how alien or difficult that might seem to us. In many ways to show kindness is an act of trust which breeds understanding and wisdom. I remember when I was at school this particular teacher presented all the pupils with a book at the end of each year that he chose as being best suited to our character. I could never quite figure out why he chose the books he gave me, but I remember his lessons, along with the kindness his actions conveyed.

Kindness seems to overcome our natural and necessary vigilance and opens our minds. Studies have shown that maltreated and traumatised children struggle at school, even when surrounded by well meaning adults striving to show "kindness". Their capacity to

trust is so damaged that learning becomes almost impossible. Often these children are stigmatised as “troublemakers”. But it is not motivation that they lack. It is the kindness that springs from genuinely understanding their perspective.

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week and its theme this year is kindness. I personally find this important in my work in a mental health hospital. The ability to think about other people’s minds and create an atmosphere of trust is essential and is the foundation that kindness itself is built on. The pandemic has reminded me that only by thinking and sharing together can we really flourish, and that excessive vigilance breeds lack of concern, unkindness and social irresponsibility. While observing socially distancing measures, I find that there is no substitute for being physically present face to face with a patient in need – even when wearing a mask! I pray that we do not forget these important lessons in our everyday activities during this coronavirus crisis.

This week also marks the lovely feast of the Ascension of the Lord - forty days after we celebrated Easter – the Feast of the Resurrection of the Lord. These last forty days do not seem that much different to the forty days of Lent for many people! But the feast of the Ascension also speaks to us of treating people with kindness and compassion without sentimentality. There’s the lovely story of the grandfather trying to explain to his grandson what happens when you die. The boy asks, “Does that mean you won’t be able to play catch with me anymore?” “Yes it does”, said the grandfather. “Does it mean you won’t be able to fly a kite with me anymore?” “Yes, son, it does.” “Does it mean you won’t be able to take me fishing anymore?” “Yes it does.” “Well, grandpa, when that time comes who is going to do these things with me, if you’re not there?” The wise of grandfather explained, “When that time comes, it will be time for you to do those things for another little boy.” The feast of the Ascension is the official statement that says, “The time has come.” It was time for Jesus to physically go back to the Father and it was time that his disciples became the voice, the hands, the feet of Jesus - to be his physical presence in the world, which we call Church. St Teresa of Avila put it beautifully when she said,

“Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

We have been commissioned to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last. The Church is called to go out on a mission, a mission that is based on kindness, compassion and justice. Just as Jesus went about doing good, so too, the Church reaches out to those in need, especially the sick, the elderly, the weak and the poor. When we look at someone with kindness it is with the eyes of Christ that we see. When we carry out an act of kindness it is with the hands of Christ that we reach out and touch other people’s lives. In these long, isolating days of lockdown the many acts of kindness shown, no matter how small, will work wonders, especially to the vulnerable.

PS A call to slow down: A snail is crossing the road when it is knocked over by a tortoise that was crossing the road from the other side and was almost crushed to death. The poor snail, unconscious was rushed to hospital and put on life support for several days before eventually recovering. The doctors ask him what happened, but the snail could only shake its head and say: “I don’t know. It all happened so fast!”