

**Stretch forth your hand to the poor
(Sir 7:32).**

The following reflection was written on 25th July, the feast of St Mary Magdalene.

Mary was the first person to see the Lord Jesus after his resurrection. She became the ‘apostle to the apostles’, and the first evangelist – sharing the good news with the other disciples. When she first saw Jesus, she wants to embrace him. But Jesus tells her not to cling to him – but **GO**, and tell the disciples.

In April, Bishop Mark highlighted in his pastoral message Christ the Servant, the outreach of love and care to the wider community made by our parishes, schools and charities in the recent Coronavirus-dominated times. He prayed that the Holy Spirit continue to lead us outwards in the mission of the Lord.

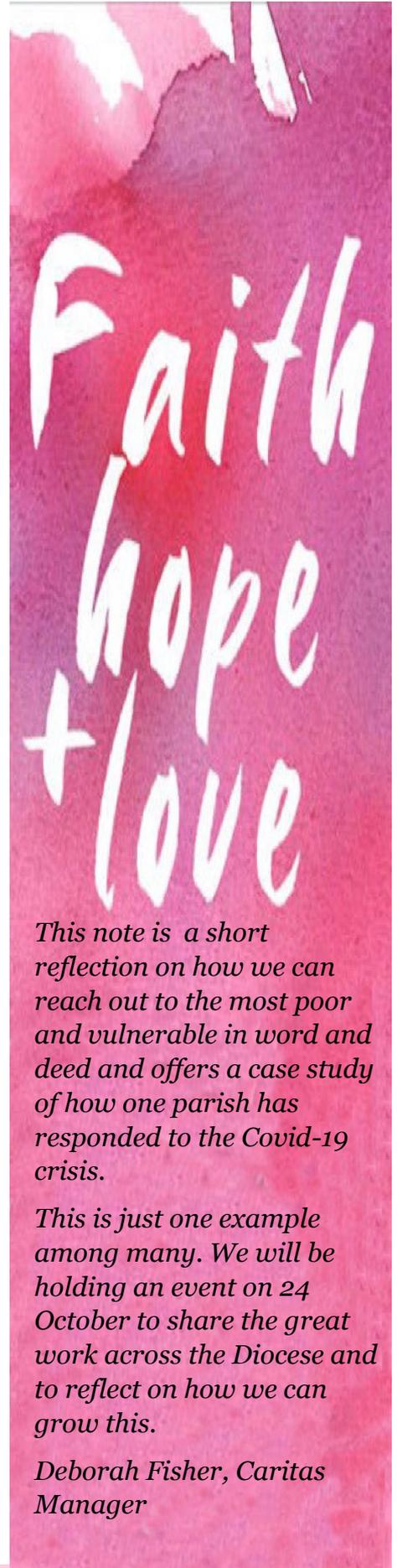
Recently, we have been re-opening our churches and returning to the celebration of public Masses. This has been a great joy and, at the same time, a real challenge in getting everything in place to enable this to happen.

It is very understandable that our focus should be on ourselves and our own needs for a time. But what a pity if we failed to build on the wonderful work that has been going on in our outreach to the most vulnerable.

We meet the Lord once again at the celebration of Mass; we listen to him, offer our lives with him, receive him in holy communion. However, as Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: ‘Do not cling to me’, but ‘**GO**’, share the good news, so also we are dismissed from Mass with these or similar words: ‘**Go** and announce the Gospel of the Lord.’ The gospel at Mass for Mary Magdalene’s feast is Jesus’ words: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches...He who abides in me bears fruit in plenty.’

We are indeed attached to the vine and may we also reach out as branches to announce the gospel of the Lord in word and action.

Canon John Deeny



This note is a short reflection on how we can reach out to the most poor and vulnerable in word and deed and offers a case study of how one parish has responded to the Covid-19 crisis.

This is just one example among many. We will be holding an event on 24 October to share the great work across the Diocese and to reflect on how we can grow this.

Deborah Fisher, Caritas Manager

Reaching Out Case Study

Sidmouth

An SVP conference of 14 volunteers who supported 25 people on a regular basis, grew to support over 120 parishioners during the Covid-19 lockdown. They offered telephone support, shopping, and urgent home repairs. They supported those living alone or couples who were shielding and unable to go out. The group worked closely with the Parish Priest and Parish Secretary to reach out to people who were lonely and isolated. The SVP team were augmented by additional parish volunteers as extra telephone befrienders.

What worked well

- ◆ The Parish has good records of its parishioners and was able to identify those who were older and living alone.
- ◆ A limited number of people have access to the personal details of volunteers and beneficiaries to comply with GDPR.
- ◆ The SVP group has a clear structure and coordinator who was able to ensure that the support was delivered in a safe manner and that volunteers were supported.
- ◆ The SVP coordinator makes first contact with a potential beneficiary to ensure that they want support and that they are matched with a suitable volunteer. People are always asked for their permission for continued calls or visits.
- ◆ Parish newsletters are emailed or posted to everyone giving them an opportunity to remain connected to the parish during lockdown. The calls and cards sent by SVP enhance this sense of connectedness.
- ◆ The link with SVP provides a structure and policies and procedures that ensure everyone is supported and safe.
- ◆ The SVP and Eucharistic Ministers keep in touch and provide mutual support.
- ◆ The SVP has established positive relationships with social care and other statutory services which can be of direct benefit if people are struggling to cope at home

What have been the benefits?

- ◆ There has been increased engagement with parishioners and new positive relationships and friendships have been formed.
- ◆ The work has addressed an unmet need. SVP were aware that the local foodbank can address food poverty so focused their efforts elsewhere.
- ◆ People who are older and isolated have regular contacts and support and this will have a positive impact on both them and the volunteers.
- ◆ There is an element of spiritual support with people offered an opportunity for prayer should they so wish. The sets this service apart from other befriending and support schemes where spiritual support is not offered.
- ◆ People have been signposted by volunteers to other sources of support within the community. The parish secretary is also actively engaged in this support network.

Reaching Out Case Study Sidmouth

What did people have to say about support from the Parish?

Some people were interviewed who have been phoned on a regular basis. Here is their feedback

- The regular contact and particularly weekly calls made a huge difference: *'it has been a lifesaver', it is 'gorgeous because we have a laugh and a chat' ..'the calls help me stay connected to the Parish'...'I felt part of the community.'*
- People also valued the opportunity to provide support to others through phone calls and valued *'doing something and not just being done to.'* *'The calls have been cathartic for both of us.'*
- Being able to access Mass and prayer online has been really important although people don't necessarily access their local parish services. *'Mass on the internet has been so important and meant a lot to me.'*
- Having a range of active social opportunities prior to lockdown meant relationships were already in place to promote social action during Covid-19. *We are a 'very social parish' who welcome people at the Church door.'*
- There is a sense of reassurance in having someone to contact if people have any concerns about themselves or others in the parish: *'We can pass on a message if anyone is not coping and we know this will be acted upon by the coordinator immediately.'*
- Everyone spoke about the friendliness and warmth of the Parish *'We are lucky to end our days here, it is like heaven on earth.'*



Reaching Out Case Study Sidmouth

Where are the gaps?

- ◆ Covid-19 has increased loneliness and isolation. For those living alone this has been a particularly difficult time. *'I am used to living alone but not used to having people not come to see me or going out to see them'*
- ◆ People may be anxious about getting out and about again and might need some support.
- ◆ Many people miss the social aspects of Mass as well as the motivation and opportunity to get out of the house and also to attend confession. This will potentially have longer term impacts on their health and wellbeing.
- ◆ Access to online opportunities (Masses and meetings) is important. Many people are able to access services online but there are a few who have struggled to get connected. *'Faith and the Church have been our rock but suddenly we lost everything and could not join Zoom'*. There needs to be consideration of how online services can be more inclusive (for example with subtitles for people with a hearing impairment or via phone for those who don't use the internet).
- ◆ People don't know each other by name and this can create barriers to reaching out: *'Sometimes I see other parishioners on my walk but don't know their names which can be embarrassing'*.
- ◆ People want the new ways of connecting to continue even when churches reopen.
- ◆ Finding volunteers will be challenging. Many retired people are caring for very elderly parents and people live longer or are looking after grandchildren. There need to be new ways to engage younger people.
- ◆ Volunteering opportunities for older people who are less mobile are really valued. The telephone support network has been an ideal way to keep people active and engaged.



What Next?

In the preface to a new book entitled "Communion and Hope" (July 2020), Pope Francis encourages everyone to rediscover solidarity amid the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. "The crisis," he said, "has shown us that, especially in times of need, we depend on our solidarity with others. In a new way, it is inviting us to place our lives at the service of others. It should make us aware of global injustice and wake us up to the cry of the poor and of our gravely diseased planet."

This case study is just one example of how we can rediscover solidarity. If you would like to share your case study, discuss any of the issues raised or get more involved with Caritas Plymouth please contact Deborah on 01364 645421 or email Caritas@prcdtr.org.uk