



Sharing your faith with the sick

By Ian Knox

I was sick and you looked after me,' Jesus said in Matthew 25:36 when encouraging us to care for others. I love the style of Jesus, going out of his way to be with people who are ill. The man lying by the pool in John 5: 1-15 is a splendid example. Of all our neighbours, perhaps this last group needs us most. The previous chapter on the housebound is worth reading first.

Helping

People who are ill are unlikely to phone and say, 'Come and see me.' You will have to take the initiative to show concern. This may prove time-consuming. Are you willing to keep on with your contact after they are discharged from hospital and then have a long period of recuperation, or as they fail to make a reasonable recovery from a stroke? Picking people up and then metaphorically dropping them does not speak well of our faith. As with the housebound, your faith will be seen in the practical help you give. You may be the scribe in writing to family and friends, or the shopper for necessities. Transport to and from hospital and doctors' appointments could feature.

Sharing

It is my experience that times of illness are very special opportunities to take the initiative in speaking of our faith and of the help Jesus longs to give. Without needing to be all pushy, here is what may prove to be a unique opening to share God's love and concern for the one who is ill, whatever is wrong. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that, unless it seems a positively bad idea, I would always offer to pray with and for someone I was visiting who was ill. I cannot understand an ordained minister ever failing to do this. People have said to me, after a minister has visited, 'I wish he'd prayed for me.' I have done some research into those suffering from strokes and dementia, and also have had personal experience of friends and family with these problems. Who knows what they can understand? My stepmother suffered for several years from a serious stroke. She could hardly complete a sentence on many occasions, yet she prayed beautifully and fluently. She taught me that we can share deep spiritual matters, albeit in an uncomplicated language, and cut through the physical and mental barriers right into the depths of the heart and soul. Speak of God's love to stroke and dementia sufferers because he can work where no one else can. Those who suffer from mental illness should be treated in a similar way. My only caveat is to be careful if others are present. Otherwise, speak of Jesus and his willingness to be right there in the suffering. I hold hands with a sick person - male or female, young or old - unless it seems inappropriate. I almost always hold their hand, or gently place a hand on their shoulder, when praying.

Visiting those in institutional care

If your neighbour or friend is ill or frail enough to be in a hospital, nursing home or hospice, there could well be others around, so particular sensitivity is needed. I always phone first, to see if my visit is convenient both for the staff and the person I wish to see. If I say I am 'from the church', that sometimes opens doors, especially to get me in when others (including family) may not be there.

I try to ignore the medical paraphernalia! I chat about the happenings in the world, especially those which will interest my sick neighbour. I keep the conversation light and happy. My aim is to find out how my sick neighbour really is, now they are in this place. They are clearly poorly enough to be in a hospital or hospice, or not strong enough to go to their own home, hence the nursing home. It is obvious they are physically unwell. But what about their spiritual health? I trust God for an opening in the conversation to talk about God, his love and his concern. After that, it is simply a case of following the leading of the Holy Spirit and sharing Jesus in a naturally easy-going way. If the nurse walks in with the tablets, we suspend the chat until medication time is over then we go on~ It would be wholly exceptional for me to leave without praying. In any bigger institution there is almost certainly a chaplain. I would encourage my sick neighbour to make contact, if I could not do so myself. They also could have a real role to play in helping with spiritual matters. I do believe that these visits - when a person is ill enough to be in a hospital, hospice or nursing home - are very special opportunities for sharing in a positive way the love of Jesus. It is another of those situations where I would aim to 'go for it'. The following story sums up how I feel.

My dying neighbour

A neighbour of mine was extremely ill in hospital. I knew him well. I went to see him one morning and asked him directly how his faith was helping him. Tears ran down his face. 'It's all in my head,' he said. 'It doesn't make any difference now'.

I held his hand and read the first few verses of John 14, where Jesus speaks of being the only way to the Father and says that he has prepared a place for us. I asked my dying neighbor if he would trust Jesus. We prayed together. A fortnight later I went to his funeral, by my sorrow was not filled with hopelessness. God gave me that one opportunity. I am so glad I took it. Your sick neighbour may not be in such dire straits, but their illness may still be the open door for positive faith-sharing. Let God take you through that door.

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