

Homily 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (11.2.18)

Emergency Appeal by the St Vincent's Support Centre Leeds

(Fr Richard) Well as we have just seen in the Gospel, Jesus overturned that commandment to Moses - now those who were considered outside the count, and those on the fringes of society Jesus wanted to bring in, and so it's a delight to invite Sheena to come forward on behalf of the St. Vincent's Support Centre to talk about exactly that same inclusive work, which the Support Centre does in our name.

(Sheena) Good morning everyone!

(Congregation) Good morning!

First may I thank Father Richard for allowing me to speak to you about the work of St. Vincent's Support Centre which is based just off York Rd, about 20 minutes away from Pudsey, just by the Irish centre. My name is Sheena. I'm the Centre Manager there, and we are basically in one of the most deprived areas in the UK. The Support Centre is a community based project of the Society of the Vincent De Paul. Last year we celebrated 21 years of helping the community and over those 21 years we've consistently provided a wide range of support services to a great many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Leeds. I did point out in the earlier Mass, that I personally haven't been around the Support Centre for 21 years!

Poverty these days is not just confined to areas of known deprivation, but can be found in many different forms within a short distance not only for our own churches but often not very far from our own front doors. So, what do we do with the centre? Quite a lot, is the answer in brief. We do debt advice and last year we dealt with almost 5 million pounds worth of debt for the local communities. People come to us quite often in crisis point. They've had loan sharks at the door, they've got eviction notices and when they come in, they are really - 'desperate' - is the word. And the first thing we do is make sure that people feel welcome, because the only way you can help is to make that person trust you and to feel welcome and valued. So we enable people to improve their quality of life by helping with the debt in the first instance and then work with them around developing budgeting skills and money management so that going forward they hopefully don't get back into that same position.

We do free counselling, I think we are the only free counselling service left in Leeds, which is a sad fact in itself. And this helps people deal with emotional issues, maybe long standing emotional issues and get the best out of their lives and that's what this is all about, giving people a value back to their life. And last year, we delivered almost 1400 hours of counselling and all of the counselling is done by qualified counsellors but they all

give their time free, which I think is an absolutely amazing fact. We've got a very large education and development programme, and each week we run over 30 classes teaching people English, literacy, IT, Art and Cooking and one of the classes does English and IT, not really sure how that works but they assure me it does. And again, it's free so anybody coming through the door knows that they can just come in, they can feel valued and that there is no charge attached to anything that we do.

We also do a lot of other activities around mental health and wellbeing really. We do a 'good mood group' that helps tackle mental health resilience and also employability skills and in that group we work with people who are quite often very far away from the job market. And again it's about building confidence, building trust, making people feel valued. And last year we helped over 700 students in Leeds to learn English and 45 long-term unemployed people got back into work, which is fantastic. In December, we were awarded the Jo Cox Compassionate City Award, of which obviously I'm really proud. And that was all about the work we do to bring people together to help them feel valued and part of the community. So one of the new things that we started to do in the last 12 to 18 months is an immigration support service, again free. And this was developed because people coming to learn English were bringing forms with them or issues with them that the tutors just didn't have the skills or the time to deal with. And we do that now once a week on a Thursday and people can come in and have free legal advice and it's given by a law firm that deal with immigration issues and they come and volunteer free of charge with us as well.

So as you can see the Centre's very much about other people's kindness and that's what makes us work. We help with legal advice, we help with form filling and also helping people settle into the community and feel that they belong. Last year, we were up to nearly 1000 people who were helped with our services. We also see people in crisis, not just with debt, and quite often people come hungry; we've got a banner there -

'Eat or heat'

which pretty much describes what we do. People are coming in saying they can either put 5 pounds in a meter to keep the place warm, or they can buy some food, and sometimes heat is the option they take. So we see about eight families or eight people a day coming in for food parcels which is quite a sad fact but we are fortunate that we are able to provide this service and again that's down to kindness, down to people like yourselves donating food for the food bank that we have. And last year we gave out 668 food parcels so it's quite a big commitment.

At Christmas, we have a Christmas campaign, and for most people we would like to think that Christmas is a happy time, but not for everybody as we have found out. And again it comes down to not having the money or the resources to provide yourself a Christmas lunch. And for some people it's gonna be quite nice to have some time with other people. So we open on Christmas day, we have Christmas lunch together, and this year we had

43 people for lunch, 27 volunteers and thank God that's a bit volunteer heavy, but actually some of those volunteers would have been people who would have been spending Christmas on their own as well. So it was actually a really happy day. People ask me and they say,

"Well, maybe if people are sad and lonely and coming to the Centre for Christmas, doesn't that make it quite a sad and lonely day?"

And the answer is

"absolutely not."

It's fantastic and I think it's really, for me, it's the best way to spend Christmas just being with other people who are in need.

Then we have lots of opportunities for volunteering, which is open to everybody. So after the last Mass, some people came forward and said for example,

"I'm a retired teacher." Or, "Can I come and volunteer?"

And the answer is

"Yes!".

Anybody can come; everybody has a value. So we've got the skilled volunteers right the way through to people who are supported in their volunteering, and may have suffered with, or are suffering with mental health issues, but there's a place for everybody. And it's an opportunity to gain some new skills, and some companionship, and also gain vital work experience. And the monetary value, when we added it up for last year for the volunteers, it was nearly half a million pounds, so volunteering is absolutely vital - we wouldn't be able to manage without our volunteers!

Father Richard just asked me to give you a couple of examples of feedback that we had from some of our service users, or clients. The first one is from a learner to her tutors:

"Thank you again for all your support. For the fantastic courses you put me through and for boosting my confidence when it was as low as it could get. With all of your help and guidance I finally found a job; yes, me, employed. I can barely believe it. I got there in the end just like you always said I would. I couldn't have done it without you."

And again, that's about, really, confidence building and making people feel of value.

A second example was from one our volunteers:

"Dear Saint Vincent's, three years ago I had nothing; no roof over my head, no money, no friends, and no hope. I slept in an empty wheely bin in a church car park. You helped me find a home, you gave me someone to talk to, and you treated me like a human being."

And who doesn't want to be treated like a human being?

"The training in your cafe helped give me skills and confidence and I'm now working again. I dread to think where I would have been today if I hadn't walked into Saint Vincent's; I genuinely believe you saved my life."

And finally, a support worker rung me up and asked if we could help with the food parcel. This family, a mum and her son had recently come to light. It turned out the child had been acting in a such a strange way in school, that the teachers didn't recognise as being normal behaviour for that child. And when the teacher investigated further she discovered that the child hadn't eaten for two days. So they rung Social Services and it turns out that the lady's partner had passed away, and the financial situation rapidly had become desperate, and the mother was worried that the child might be taken from her, and she felt ashamed to ask for help. So we all worked together; it wasn't just us, we worked together a whole range of services, and we were able to support the family and make sure that that didn't happen again. It also gave her the confidence to come in if she did need anything else in the future.

So this is the second only appeal that we've made to the parishes in the 21 years. I'm sure you've been aware that changes to government grants and declining monies available to us, coupled with a totally unexpected 70,000 pound cost for the enforced move last year from our premises, all forced us into this action. We are a not for-profit organization so everything goes back into services, but we do obviously, as with any service and building, we do have substantial costs to cover in order to maintain the services we offer to those in desperate need of help. So I think we were here in St Joseph's about four years ago - that was before I took over the role of manager, and I would just like to thank you for your tremendous generosity last time. And just to let you know some of the ways we spent the money last time. Firstly we were able to provide more training opportunities for our volunteers. We made sure that the food parcel service could keep going because at that time that was at risk, and also we were able to put the extra money towards funding for much a much needed full time debt advisor.

So there's envelopes in your Mass books; please be as generous as you can. Members of the lovely SVP are at the back of the church to collect your donations at the end of the Mass. And if you are able to gift aid if you're a UK taxpayer, you could just tick the gift aid box because that adds 25% extra for us at no extra cost to yourself. You can also, if you prefer give an online donation on the Support Centre website. So it's only the second time, we've had to appeal like I said, and the Bishop has kindly expressed his full support for this. When he came to open the centre in June last year, he described us as a genuine door of mercy, which is an absolutely fantastic thing to hear from the Bishop.

And finally, if you are ever out and about and you fancy a good cup of coffee and a cake, we're just based off York Road. The centre's open Monday to Friday 9:00-5:00; the cafe's provides an excellent range of foods and drink - much of it homemade on the premises, and if you want to come in, just to have a look around, to see what we do, meet the team, look at the services, then by all means come - it's a genuine offer; please come in and say hello. Again, thank you Father Richard. I'm sorry for you Fr, for having to listen to me three times saying pretty much the same thing, but seriously thank you Fr Richard, for

allowing us the opportunity to make this appeal, it's very much appreciated. God bless you all and please you remember us in your prayers.

Thank you.

NB This Appeal raised the magnificent sum of almost £1100!