**Cross Purposes**

1) Alison

Shortly after I began my chaplaincy in Church Street I went into a Shop at the entrance to Liverpool One. As I usually did when I entered a store for the first time I asked for the manager so that I could introduce myself to him or her and explain what I was doing there.

Most of the managers who I have this conversation with seem confused and wonder what a chaplain is doing visiting them and what possible use I could be to them or their business. Alison on the other hand was really excited to find out that there was a Chaplain in the street who would drop in and visit them once or twice a week. She was one of the first people I met that actually made me feel welcome and made me feel that I might actually be able to do the job that I had just taken on. Alison is a Christian.

It turned out that Alison was unable to go to church because she worked almost every Sunday and she missed being able to do so. For this reason I think she appreciated that though she couldn’t go to church, in some way I could bring church to her.

On the third or fourth occasion that I visited Alison I found her waving her left hand in the air and asking for a miracle. Her forearm was encased in what, when I was young, we called a plaster cast but are obviously made out of other things nowadays.

Apparently her arm had all sorts of torn muscles and ligaments and if they didn’t heal within a few weeks the doctor had said that they would have to operate. Alison was convinced, however, that if she and I and everyone else she knew prayed about her new affliction that it could be healed within three weeks. Later that day having asked all the chaplains to pray for Alison I returned to her shop and entering and standing beside her I said “I have something I want to give you.” Alison reached out and I passed my hand over hers , opening my hand and letting the wooden cross that I was holding fall the two or three inches into her hand.

“Oh,” she said, “a cross”

“Yes,” I said, “Whenever you feel as if you need encouragement hold on to the cross. Whenever you pray, hold on to the cross, and remember that it is the symbol of the sacrifice that the Lord made for us.”

She thanked me.

Within three weeks her wrist and arm were out of the cast and she was back to normal.

2: Barbara

Barbara worked at a shop selling beauty products, but had a secret wish to be working as a midwife at the Women’s Hospital off Upper Parliament Street. Unfortunately she was not qualified to do so but she had a nursing qualification that she thought would help her to get a job at “The Women’s” and so her dream lived on.

Shortly after I came to work in Church Street, I was told that the shop that Barbara and three or four others worked in would shortly be closing down. Each time I popped in to see the ladies that worked in the shop there was a fresh update or estimation of just how long they would be open and how soon they might be closing. It was always “In a couple of weeks” or “at the end of next week” or even “this will be our last week!” Somehow the end didn’t come and each time they were threatened with imminent closure there was a reprieve and a stay of execution and they lived on.

There were always one or two shop assistants in the shop and as the weeks went by I got to know them all, however there were three who I saw most often and who hung on until the end, one of these was Barbara.

Barbara, was a very pleasant, outgoing and friendly girl, with dark hair and brown eyes, who on one occasion, informed me that what she really dreamed of doing was working as a midwife in the Woman’s Hospital in Liverpool, however although she would have loved to have done this, she only had a minor nursing qualification which although it would not qualify her as a midwife, might she hoped be enough to get her a nursing job at “The Women’s”.

As we talked about her dream, it transpired that in order to apply for a job at the hospital she would have to attend the hospital on any Tuesday morning when they would accept applications. Somehow Barbara had never been able to make it to the hospital on Tuesday morning and so her dream remained just another unrequited dream. I recall wondering if her fear was such that if she applied and was turned down then her dream would be over whereas if she never quite made in to the hospital to submit an application, her dream, even though she never tried to make that dream come true, would still be a light shining there in the distance rather than a light that had been extinguished and had gone out for ever. It would still be a possibility and not a failure.

One day I dropped into her shop and found Barbara a bit agitated- she was worried about her mother. Three days before while Barbara was at work she had received a phone call from her mother who was in a bit of a state. It turned out that the penthouse of the block of flats that Barbara’s mum lived in had caught fire and the top of the building was engulfed in flame.

Barbara’s mother who lived in a flat, I think on the tenth floor of the building, phoned her daughter.

“Barbara?”

“Yes Mum?”

“Barbara, I don’t know what to do!” she sounded a little concerned even worried.

“What’s wrong mum?” asked her daughter.

“The building is on fire, and I don’t know what to do.”

Imagine, as the flames billowed from the top story of the apartment block, as smoke billowed along landings and stairwells, Barbara’s mum took the time to phone her daughter, because she wasn’t sure what to do.

“Get out of there.” Barbara’s voice sounded urgent the instruction implicit. He mother could be in no doubt what she should do.

Obviously by the time I spoke to Barbara, her mother had escaped from the fire and was safe in temporary accommodation across the other side of Stanley Park somewhere, but she was still upset and obviously concerned about her possessions and the condition of her flat.

I asked Barbara if her mother was religious and she said “Yes,” that she was Roman Catholic. I gave Barbara a small wooden cross and said…

“Give this to you mother. Tell her to hold it in her hand when she is feeling down or troubled. Tell her it will bring her peace and take all her troubles away. Tell her to keep it in her pocket or purse so she will always have it with her.”

Barbara was grateful.

3: Christine

Christine is the manager of a travel agents in Church Street and she is a lovely lady who always seemed concerned about her staff and make sure that the atmosphere that they work in is warm and friendly.

However at the time of my visits to her and her shop in May 2015 things were not going too well: A week before hand there had been a court case, reported nationally in the press concerning two children who had died while on Holiday due to a faulty boiler. The children’s parents had booked the holiday through Christine’s Travel agency and the company came out of the trial looking very bad, they had not handled the situation of the bereavement at all well.

The effect of these sad deaths and the reporting of them was hard on the travel agents shops and on their staff. Business fell as people boycotted the shops in protest and the staff, who were not responsible for any of the problems felt sad, of course, but also I assumed that their work and pay were effected as they would get much less commission than was usual and their bonuses would have been effected. All in all, their morale fell. They felt unappreciated and sat at their desks with precious little to do all day long.

As Chaplains we went to offer our thoughts and prayers to Christine and her staff. Often I find that managers, especially good managers who really care, are more concerned about their staff than they are about themselves. It is the same with mothers who worry more about their children and their children’s health and well-being than they do about their own. So I make it a point of asking how the managers are doing because it often seems that they are so busy caring for others that no one cares about them. It’s the same with ministers or doctors and nurses who care for others and forget about themselves.

“And how are you?” I asked.

Christine breathed a sigh and then told me. “My father has been having tests for cancer, and they are going to start Chemo therapy quite soon. They think they have caught it early and they can sort it out, but of course we are worried.”

I asked Christine the question I often ask at such times, “Is you family religious?”

I have asked this question several times and as yet have always received an affirmative response.

“Yes,” she said, “They are catholic.”

I said “Can I give you something?”

When she nodded I gave her a small wooden cross. “Hang on to that,” I said “or give it to your father, keep it close and if you feel trouble or are struggling take hold of it and it will give you courage if you are afraid or peace if you are troubled.”

She seemed touched , even though in essence it was just a bit of wood, somehow it means more and it meant more to her.

“Thank you” she said, and I could tell she meant it.

4: Denis

In my work as Lay Pastor for the Methodist Church, I take extended communion to several people and families who are housebound and cannot get to church anymore. Denis and Dorothy Davies were one such family.

I had been taking Communion to the Davies’ for 8 or 9 months, and always sat and talked to them after giving them the communion. Denis was Irish and was brought up in Donegal which was where my Great Grandmother lived before she was married in Derry Cathedral.

Because of our Irish connections and our love for that blessed isle we always had lots to talk about and I grew very close to Denis and Dorothy as time went by and as I visited them more often.

Then in July 2015, Denis had a fall. He hadn’t been steady on his feet for some time but managed with a stick and wouldn’t countenance using a frame or wheelchair. He had to take care of Dorothy, and between them, they looked after each other, compensating for each-others deficiencies and they managed although Dorothy wasn’t very mobile either.

I visited Denis several time while he was in Hospital, and then again while he was in a care home in Norris Green for rehabilitation and physiotherapy, to strengthen him so that he was able to manage when he went home.

While he was in hospital I felt moved to give Denis a wooden cross. When I did I suggested, as I had taken to when giving others one of these crosses, that he held on to it when he was troubled and perhaps when he prayed. I suggested it would help him focus on the Saviour and his love for us and that it would bring him peace when he was struggling or worried.

I was aware that Denis appreciated having the cross as it was always on view on the table beside his bed when I went to see him every week.

Denis was eventually fit enough to go home and was discharged from the care home. A few days later Dorothy went up to bed and after a while wondered why Denis had not come to bed. She called out to him but getting no reply thought she had best go and make sure he was OK. When she got to the top of the stairs she saw him lying, unmoving, on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

Denis died, on the evening of Sunday 2nd August.

I visited the family several times over the next week and was honoured to take the funeral nine days later. Twice during that period, once when I visited the family one evening and a second time during the wake after the funeral, Denis’s daughter went out of her way to tell me how much her father had appreciated the cross, he had kept it close by him all the time and it had meant a lot to him.

5: Ellen

Ellen is 102 years old, but is as bright as a shiny new button. She is fairly active and gets about quite well and has every one of her marbles! What was hard for me to get my head around was that when she talked about her children, they were in their seventies and eighties, her grandchildren were in their late forties and fifties and her great grandchildren were also grown up and in their twenties. Ellen lives in a care home in Maghull, and has a nice room with a bay window and a lovely view of the garden where she sometimes goes and sits if the sun ever comes out and it’s warm enough. The rest of the time Ellen stays in her room, not liking to associate with the other ‘inmates’ because some suffer with dementia and most are not great conversationalists.

I take communion to Ellen once a month and read a short service from the liturgy of the Methodist Worship book. The only problem I have with this is that I have almost to shout as Ellen, even with her hearing aid in, is rather deaf. And when I say I shout, I do so to an extent that my throat is sometimes strained with the effort.

Ellen has one friend who lives in the care home on the floor above hers (Ellen lives on the first floor, her friend on the second) and every evening after they have both had their evening meal, Ellen’s friend comes down stairs and sits with Ellen for about an hour and a half and they discuss the events of their lives and the issues that interest them.

Ellen is a devout Methodist, her friend is a committed Catholic.

I believe that Ellen somehow felt guilty for having lived so long. She often told me that all seven of her siblings had died of cancer and that her children had suffered with cancer but that somehow she had avoided the condition. The fact that she had lived so long while her family perished exacerbated her feelings of guilt. She would often say things like “I don’t know why I am still here” or “Why have I lived so long and they are all gone?” On this particular day Ellen told me that she had been having several sleepless nights and then as she shared once more the litany of those who had perished from the dreaded condition, she now added one new name to the list, that of one of her grandchildren, Elizabeth, who had been in hospital quite recently and had been diagnosed with cancer.

The guilt, and the pain that were only ever held at bay were with her again. When I left her that morning I felt so sorry for her. She should not have had to carry the weight of all that pain and for so long. As I left the home and got into the car I had this nagging thought that I should have given her a cross. I am not used to such feelings and wondered if this was some spiritual suggestion or impression. Not being used to such things I would not have recognised it as such, and so I dismissed it as just an idle thought and not of spiritual origin. However as I sat in the car the thought came to me that “Since I never had spiritual nudges, how would I know one if I did, and even if this wasn’t any such thing, wouldn’t it be better to do what the “thought” suggested just in case?

I reached in my pocket and found a small cross there. I retraced my steps and arriving back at Ellen’s side I said:

“I have something for you Ellen.” And opening my hand I let the cross fall into hers. “It is a cross.” I know I was stating the obvious but I continued “When you are feeling down or can’t sleep, hold the cross in your hand and remember what it means. There is healing and consolation in the cross. It will help you to find peace and help you find rest.”

Ellen thanked me and a few days later George, a member of our congregation who visits Ellen quite often came to me and told me that when he had visited recently Ellen had told him about my gift and that she really appreciated the cross that I had given her.

Several weeks later when I visited her again Ellen also told me that had kept the cross with her and close by at all times.

6: Fiona

Fiona used to work with me in a former existence when I was a kitchen designer, and I kept in touch with her when I went on to work as a lay-pastor and a Chaplain. One day in the summer of 2015 I dropped in to see her and another employee told me that she was having a few days off for bereavement leave because her father-in-law had died a few days before.

It turned out that her husband, Frank’s, parents had gone on holiday to Spain and his father had died while on holiday. The family were distraught and terribly upset and it fell to Fiona to get things sorted out and deal with the aftermath. It was Fiona that arranged for the body of her step-father to be returned to England, arranged things with an undertaker and sorted the funeral arrangements.

I dropped into the shop again a few days later when I expected Fiona to be there. When I sat down with her for a few minutes she told me all the details about her husband’s deceased father.

She told me how hard it had hit the whole family and I asked her:

“Are Frank and his family religious?”

She looked at me and said “Everyone’s religious at times like this aren’t they.”

I told her to tell Frank that I was sorry to hear about his loss and that I would pray for the family.

Shortly after I left the shop I felt that I should have given Fiona a cross to give to her husband, so the next day I returned to the shop and gave one of the crosses to her.

Fiona was grateful and told me that when she had told Frank that I had been so see her that he really appreciated my thoughtfulness. She said that he would really appreciate the gift of the cross.

7: Glynis

Glynis is welsh and is from Anglesey. She is one of those wonderful people who is always taking care of other people and always visiting the sick and taking flowers to people in hospital. Glynis is just a nice person who would do anything for anybody. Sadly Glynis’s husband, George, an ex-police officer, is not doing well. He has Alzheimer’s and dementia and is slowly slipping away.

Glynis won’t leave George alone for long now, so even when she is out helping, visiting and caring for others, he is always on her mind. Even when Glynis comes to church on Sunday she cuts short the time she gets to sit with her friends, the other members of the church so that she can get back to her husband.

I often stop Glynis in passing at church or in a meeting and ask her how George is doing and she rarely has any good news. It is a debilitating disease and it is basically all down-hill, forever as far as George is concerned.

One day after Church I asked after George, and Glynis said that she had to get back to him and that it was a struggle sometimes. I assured her that I would pray for her as I always did.

I was nearly in my car when I felt impressed to think that I should have given Glynis a cross. I immediately returned and handed her one of the crosses that I always kept in my pocket.

I have always been a religious, spiritual, person but never really felt God’s presence in my life and when other people talked about God as if He was a real person who “told” them to do things or “nudged” them when they were looking the wrong way or gave them “feelings” that they should do something or other. I never felt that things like that happened to me and was quite suspicious that people who thought that way were delusional and seeing or feeling things that weren’t actually there. Lately however as I get more involved in my work as a lay-pastor with the Methodist Church and the Chaplaincy work that I do in Liverpool town centre, I have begun to have feelings that I think must be the sort of nudges or promptings that I have heard described in the past by people I thought were delusional. It is unusual, therefore, for me to feel that I am being nudged or that I am prompted by feelings in this way, and that I should be doing something or should do something, so when the prompting comes to me, now, I act upon it, just in case it’s a real prompting rather than the possibility that I too am becoming delusional.

Anyway, Glynis seemed very grateful for the cross that I had given her so I was glad that I had listened to the prompting of the spirit, and that I wasn’t deluded.

8: Harry

Harry is the manager of one of the large shops that I go into in Church Street in Liverpool. We had been into this shop on several occasions and asked Harry if we could sit in their lunch room for a while one day in an effort to get to know and build relationships with more of his staff. Harry was happy for us to do this. Then, as we sat in his office, he began to tell us why he was happy to help. This was his story:

A few years before Harry thought that he was going to be fired and lose his job. It was not a problem he had caused or something he had done, but one of the employees at his store had committed some grievous sin, and as the manager it was Harry’s ultimate responsibility that this problem had come about.

Harry was summoned to a disciplinary meeting at the Head offices in Manchester and he was convinced that he was about to lose his job.

On the way to Head Office Harry told me that he walked past a Christian bookshop. He had come along this road many times before on his way to meetings at their offices but he had never noticed this shop before. Harry went into the shop and spoke to one of the nuns who worked there. He felt compelled to tell her about his situation and she prayed with him and blessed before he went back out into the cruel world outside.

Harry did not lose his job, but was given a warning. Ever since he had honoured God because in his heart he knew that God had made the difference and, because of the prayers that had been offered up on his behalf, things had gone well for him.

As we left his office I felt I should give Harry one of the crosses.

9: Irene

Irene works in Jewellers in Church Street. I don’t recall seeing her in there before, but on the days I first met her, as I was passing through their shop and talking to some of those that worked there I noticed her working and also saw that she had a gold cross on a chain hanging round her neck.

I paused and said hello and told her that I was a Chaplain who worked in Church Street and that we dropped into all the shops from time to time to chat with the employees and management to see if we could do anything to help. I told her that we were a listening ear and were there to help if we could.

She said that she thought that that was nice.

I said “You’ve got a cross round your neck, are you religious.”

She looked down and said, “I looked for this everywhere today and couldn’t find it because I wanted to wear it, but I found it in the end.” Then she unburdened herself some more: “We have had two deaths in the family recently” she said, “My uncle and now my sister.”

I was full of sympathy and after I left the shop I thought I should have given Irene a cross but I felt I couldn’t go back in and do so in front of all the customers and the other staff.

Two days later I was back in Church Street and almost left the shop again without giving Irene the cross that I felt I should have given her two days before. I was almost outside of the shop but returned and Irene was standing behind a counter just inside the door and I said:

“Can I give you something?”

She looked confused, as anyone would. People you barely know don’t often offer you gifts.

I held out my hand and showed her “It’s a cross” I said “I thought it might help you, something to hold on to when things are tough.”

She thanked me, took the cross I offered her and smiled.

I don’t see Irene every time I am in the shop but the next time I bumped into her I asked her how things were going. I could tell she didn’t want to talk too much in front of the other employees, but after a second she said; “Next week will be my Sister’s birthday, it will be the first birthday since she died. The first of everything is always difficult isn’t it?”

I agreed with her.

“I still have the cross.” She added, “In my handbag.” She said, and she smiled again.

10: Dorothy

Dorothy’s heart broke when her husband Denis passed away. I don't think I have ever seen someone as lost as she was without her husband. Denis and Dorothy had complemented each other. Their lives and gifts dovetailed in complete harmony, and without him she was lost.

It was I suppose no real surprise that little more than a month after Denis passed I heard that Dorothy had been taken into hospital. She had had a fall.

I took to visiting Dorothy once a week after that and although she soon recovered from the infection that had overcome her she was very weak and had never been very sure on her feet. The hospital wouldn't send her home if she couldn't fend for herself and of course even they couldn't mend a broken heart.

Two or three weeks after she was taken into hospital I gave Dorothy a cross. I think it pleased her that I did so because she knew I had also given one to Denis and that he had found comfort in it.

A couple of weeks after this I visited Dorothy in the company of Connie and Jean who were also members of our church and found that she had been moved to another ward because she had had an “episode”, I think it was a problem with her heart, though they said she was now stable.

While we were with her she suddenly realised that her cross was not on her bedside table nor on the pillow beside her

She said "Where is my cross?"

After a brief search we found the missing item in her handbag and restored it to her, placing it on the table at her side. She picked it up from a moment and said:

"It always reminds me of the old rugged cross."

And I could see that just as a similar cross had meant something special to her husband Denis, so this small wooden cross had come to mean something very special to Dorothy too.

11: Jessie

Jessie is a Methodist minister. She is not well and when I visited in Aintree Hospital I could see that, despite her putting a brave face on it, she wasn’t in a good place. I visited her with a couple of other members of the church and we talked for a while about her memories and mutual friends.

Through it all I could see that she was in a worse state than she said. Even when she admitted that things were bad, it was said in an offhand way, as if it hardly mattered. It was what it was and there was no point being down hearted about it. She was on painkillers.

I had also been made aware that her husband, who was her carer, had fallen himself and injured his head. Things in Jessie’s life were not going well.

I prayed with the small group, Jessie and her visitors, before we left. I asked her if there was anything in particular that she would wish me to pray for. She said to pray that the medical work that had been done would be successful.

So we prayed together and then as we rose to leave I lingered for a moment behind the others and reached out and took her hand and gave her one of the crosses.

I said: “You know what this is and what it means, and I just felt it might help you to focus on the power of the cross and of our saviour.”

She thanked me.

Sometimes you cannot be sure if the simple wooden cross is meaningful to the person you give it to, but if it is given with faith and in sincerity, even though you cannot tell how it is received or be sure that it will be received in the same spirit in which it was given. It is the giving that is important. The rest is up to God.

12: Kate

Kate had worked in one of the smaller shops that I visit ever since I had begun serving as a Chaplain in Church Street, so I had known her for at least a year. She was from Donegal and I had often talked about her home in Ireland because half of Liverpool have Irish roots or Irish relatives so we all have a lot in common. My Great grandmother lived in Donegal too.

Kate seemed very young, but when you get to my age, all the policemen seem to be around 20 years old. All sorts of people doing very important jobs look like teenagers who are barely out of school.

One day in September 2015, Kate revealed that she was leaving her job, leaving Liverpool and going back to Ireland with her boyfriend.

Kate had found a job, in Dublin, managing a similar shop to the one she was assistant manager of in Liverpool, her boyfriend had also found a good job in Dublin and they would leave in a few weeks.

The last time I visited Kate in her shop was on a Thursday. I asked if she had her bags packed yet as I couldn’t remember just how soon it was before she left. She told me that the coming Saturday was her last day in the shop and the following Monday they would be flying to Dublin.

I wished Kate all the best and good luck in her new life and with her new job.

Then as I left the shop I thought “Should I have given her a cross?”

There was no reason to give her a cross, I had only ever given crosses to people who were struggling or in difficulties to help them in their trials. So there was no reason why I should give Kate a cross. I kept walking and thought: “Perhaps I should give her a Cross anyway.”

So for no reason that I could think of, and still uncertain whether or not I should I retraced my steps, I went back into the shop and said:

I want to give you something, and I handed her a cross.

I said “It’s supposed to keep you safe.” I don’t know why I said those particular words.

Kate thanked me and I felt that I would probably never see her again, and wondered again why I had given her the Cross but I reflected that I would rather give her a cross for no reason that I knew, than not give her a cross when I should have.