

TALKING POINT Fr Padraig Regan, chaplain at The Passage invites **Anita Boniface** to a session of prayer with some homeless men and women

Heart speaks unto heart – Lessons from the poor

THE Passage is a fitting name for a homelessness charity with a Catholic heart. It is here, on a hazy Tuesday morning in July that I experience a kind of passage myself – deep into my Catholic faith – through which I am escorted by a small band of homeless men and two Catholic chaplains.

The encounter feels at once painfully moving and joyful, powerful and humbling together. These four homeless men and the two chaplains – one a priest and the other a religious sister – speak from the very core of their hearts. Heart speaks unto heart as Cardinal John Henry Newman once wrote, and this is what we are witnessing here.

Chaplain Fr Padraig Regan has invited me to attend a session of prayer with some homeless men and women. This is to be a bit of a spiritual prequel to an interview I am to do with Fr Padraig as part of my Vincentian work for the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) where I belong to the Communications team.

During the service, led by Fr Padraig, a priest from the order Congregation of the Mission, and facilitated Sr Bernie, a Sister from the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, I hear four homeless men read and reflect on Mathew 13 – The parable of the sower. No stony ground is to be found here. These men seize upon the Word, grappling with the parable to reap meanings that have never occurred to me. Homeless and therefore poor they may be, but their interpretation and reflections on the parable are rich and ripe with meaning and personal, heartfelt truths.

I am particularly touched by the reflection of one man who I later learn is a psychiatric in-patient fleeing from an NHS hostel and currently taking refuge at The Passage until he is necessarily returned (he has since been helped to return to his care setting). This man, let's call him Andrew although that is not his real name, speaks with exquisite eloquence and poignancy of his own sense of personal worthlessness and guilt. He talks of the "bigotry" with which he is spurned and looked down upon by society. But he is also very quick to identify that he too has "bigoted attitudes"

to those who he encounters at times; he too judges, but he feels his own guilt in that. He confesses that it is wrong to judge, and he should know. He says that because people project our own prejudices and fears on to each other, we do serious damage to one another. Andrew says of himself, "I became what I believed myself to be. I was told I was worthless so I believed I am worthless, and now I am worthless."

Such is the woundedness contained in Andrew's perspective that to listen to him pierces the soul. When Sr Bernie speaks of the sower in the Gospel parable, Andrew reflects that he had misheard the Sister, and thought she was speaking of a sewer. He explains that this hearing of the word sewer, a place streaming with filth and pollution, was the projection of his own inner sense of degradation and worthlessness.

Later, during my interview with Fr Padraig, the chaplain tells me of the vital importance of the Christian ethos of The Passage in witnessing to Andrew his innate dignity and essential goodness as a child of God.

"As a Christian organisation we offer something a little different to say, local council homelessness provisions. At the core of how we serve others is the Christian vision of people. I want to tell Andrew of his value and preciousness to God, and to us, and this can often be said not through words but just by being attentive to him."

The concept of each client's preciousness has arisen a lot during the prayer service. Fr Padraig's key message is that we are all intrinsically precious in God's eyes. For many of these men and women, says the priest, their backgrounds are very troubled. They are likely to have come from painful childhoods where they were deprived of the parental love needed to lay the foundations and building blocks of healthy self-esteem. As a result, they are more susceptible to damaging influences in their lives – abuse, addiction, mental illness, imprisonment because of crime, and they end up not only rejected in childhood, but rejected by society in adulthood

too. The priest continues: "Many people here have experienced very unsatisfactory childhoods and they feel that their lives have been a failure and that they are despised by society. But if our clients, including Andrew, can find that there is respect, a reverence for them here, then we have done our job."

I learn about another client, let's call him Joe – a former national Irish Boxing champion whose successful life was blighted by alcohol addiction and who ended up homeless living on the streets. More recently Joe met a woman in a tobacco store, and they fell in love. Last year, while she was dying in hospital, he married her. Even after so much hardship and loss in his life, he was still able to find the redemptive power of love.

Fr Padraig says that each man and woman has a story, and "it is by being present to them, to hear that story that we remind them of their dignity and how precious each one of them is."

Many of these stories are told informally, in simple everyday settings such as the dining room canteen where Fr Padraig will dine with the 120 men and women, most who will never set foot in the chapel for prayer or Mass.

"This method of evangelisation is simply through presence. Through being present to clients we acknowledge their dignity and foster hope."

Fr Padraig tells me: "In a place like this, I go out and am present to people who won't go to church, but I will have my food with them in the canteen, and they will start having questions, and often deeply religious conversations, and they won't come to the prayer meeting, but you're still talking to them about faith, and you never know what impact it is having."

Fr Padraig also speaks of the value of being present in practical ways, as well as emotionally and spiritually. "I work on a Monday morning, I am here at 6.30am to open up and I am at reception, and people would see me then as part of the staff. They don't initially know that I am a chaplain. Clients see that you are engaged, doing menial tasks like giving them a towel, giving them a detox

bath to get rid of lice. Menial, everyday tasks to help them, simple tasks are a way of being present."

The Passage is part of the Vincentian Family of 25 charities inspired and centred around the vision and values of St Vincent de Paul. This practical expression of Gospel values is typically Vincentian.

"St Vincent talked about preaching with the strength of our arm, and the sweat of our brow". It is also the message of St Francis of Assisi who said we should "preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary use words", Fr Padraig tells me.

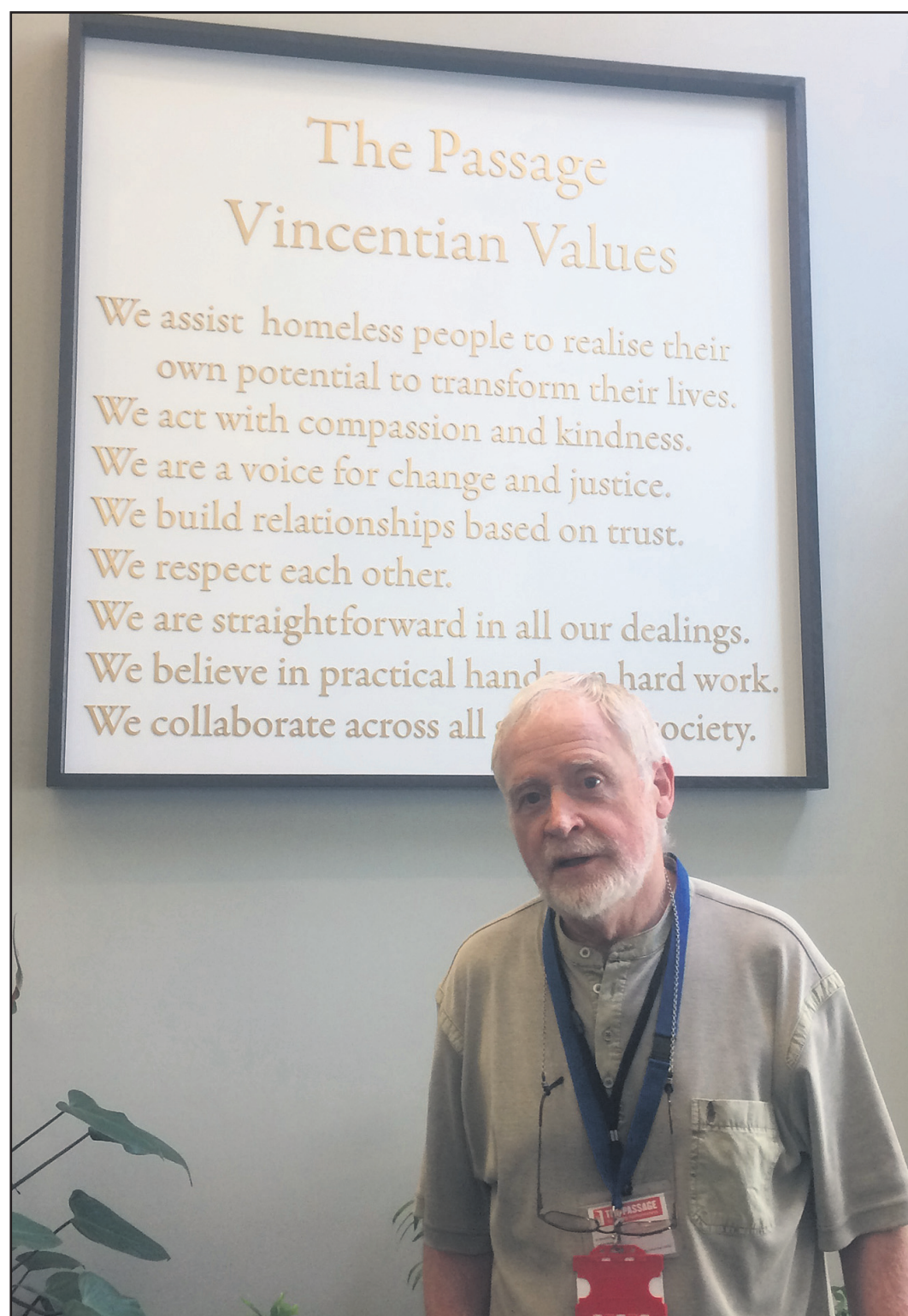
"Actions speak louder than words and even preached words can sometimes sound hollow if they don't translate into action. If people see us as just word-smiths, just preaching a message that doesn't translate into practical impact, then it's hard to take those words on board."

The Passage is based on Carlisle Street, a stone's throw away from Westminster Cathedral, and is surrounded by luxury houses and flats.

Fr Padraig says that this raises an anomaly of people living in apartments worth millions of pounds, and within walking distance people who have nowhere to sleep at night. However, the chaplain says that "the mission of the Church is to the poor, as well as the wealthy. You have no idea of the impact you may be having on the affluent members of the surrounding community through our work with the homeless, but we do it anyway." It raises an interesting image of the wealthy being evangelised by the poor and the work being done to support the poor.

According to Fr Padraig it is vital not to be paternalistic and look down on clients when helping them. He says it is the poor who can teach us what the Gospel is about. St Vincent de Paul said the poor are "our Lords and our Masters". They are the people who can teach us about who we should be.

"They teach through their experience of failure. I was once a director of education in a seminary and my students went on strike against me. This was a painful experience of failure, but



Mission to the poor – Fr Padraig Regan, chaplain at The Passage.

through it I can recognise what Andrew feels in people's disregard for him. I could feel that too, deeply."

"It helps to have experienced

failure if you're going to help others. It's like the apples in the orchard. The apples only get sweet with the first touch of frost. Failure, if handled and appropriated,

can mature us and make us sweet. And then, as with the wisdom of St Vincent and the Gospel, we are like the good soil and the seed can fall and be fruitful."

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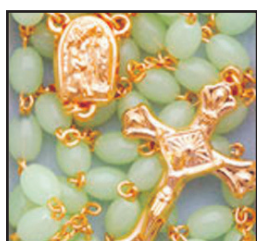
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