

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2020

CELEBRATING THE NHS

***Heavenly Father, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake
AMEN***

Come back with me if you will to a minute before midnight on July 4th 1948. In a small hospital – The Amman Valley Hospital – in West Wales, a lady named Edna May Rees has been in labour for 18 hours. Edna had six children before, and she knew the midwives were usually telling you to push. But instead of urging Edna to push, the midwives were saying ‘Hold on, Edna! Hold on!’ Then the clock ticked past midnight. ‘Push,’ they said, ‘now you can push!’” And so at a minute past midnight on July 5th 1948, Aneira was born – the very first baby to be born into the National Health Service. She was named Aneira after Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health at the time the NHS came into being. At that moment, health care in the UK changed forever.

Aneira dedicated herself to the NHS all her working life and she became a mental health nurse. Aneira’s daughter is a paramedic. Two of her aunts were matrons and two of her sisters were nurses. The NHS saved Aneira’s life when she had anaphylactic shock and they saved the life of her son when he had a brain haemorrhage. Aneira has written a book about her memories of the NHS. Appropriately it’s titled “Hold on Edna!”

I discovered that 2020 is the ‘Year of the Nurse’. Much will be retold this year about Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole – two pioneers of nursing. Florence Nightingale was sent to the Crimean War front in the 1850’s to manage and train nurses caring for the wounded and was known as the ‘Lady with the Lamp’ making her night-time ward rounds. In 1860 Florence founded the first secular school of nursing at St Thomas’ Hospital. Mary Seacole was a British-Jamaican nurse who wanted so much to nurse on the front line in Crimea that she made several applications and was even turned down by Florence Nightingale. In the end Mary travelled to the Crimea on her own expenses and set up ‘The British Hotel’ to be a ‘comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers’. Florence Nightingale acknowledged good reports of Mary Seacole, but for some reason she didn’t want her nurses associating with her.

You might have detected a bit of a Welsh theme at the beginning of this talk. So continuing in that vein - did you know that there was a ‘Welsh Florence

Nightingale'? Her name was Betsi Cadwaladr. In her 60's Betsi trained to become a nurse, volunteered for the military nursing service, and was posted to a hospital in Scutari run by Nightingale. There were frequent clashes between Betsi and Florence. Florence stuck rigidly to the rules whereas Betsi often sidestepped the rules to help wounded soldiers more effectively not least in making conditions more hygienic. In the end Betsi moved to another hospital nearer the front line in Balaclava where she battled to get supplies through. Florence visited Betsi twice in Balaclava and eventually acknowledged that Betsi was doing wonderful work as her methods brought about change in the treatment of the wounded soldiers. And now if ever you need treatment on the NHS in North Wales you will be treated by The Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board named in honour of the Welsh Florence Nightingale.

Nursing today bears no relation to what those pioneers started in the Crimea or even what it was like at the birth of the NHS in 1948. However, the basic principles have not changed at all. As the poster for the 2020 Year of the Nurse says: "Midwives and nurses are with you at each step of life. They see you into the world and care for you as you leave it, helping you to stay healthy and support you if you are sick". There is so much to give thanks for – for our health service and particularly this year for our nurses who have been on the front line of the battle against Covid19 - nurses on the front line yet again.

Back in April, Boris Johnson, on his release from hospital after his own battle with Covid19 praised the NHS. He described it as 'unconquerable' and 'the beating heart of this country'. Significantly the two nurses who treated him were Jenny McGee from New Zealand and Luis Pitarma from Portugal. These two show how much the NHS relies on doctors and nurses from other countries. The Prime Minister said that they embodied the caring and sacrifice of NHS staff on the front lines of the pandemic. He said 'That is how I know, that across this country, 24 hours a day, for every second, for every hour, there are hundreds of thousands of NHS staff who are acting with the same care and thought and precision as Jenny and Luis.' 24 hours a day, every day – the NHS is there for all of us caring, skilled and compassionate.

Our Old Testament reading today speaks of healing as a gift from God. 'Honour physicians for their services, for their gift of healing comes from the Most High'. For physicians also read, nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, pharmacists, laboratory staff, radiologists, GP's, GP receptionists, dentists, chiropodists, and all other healthcare professionals too many to name who work to keep us healthy and support us when we are ill. One special group I

should mention are our NHS hospital chaplains. They have had an incredibly difficult task in the Covid19 crisis. Jacqueline Dean who is a Lay Reader in Reigate Deanery is a hospital chaplain at the East Surrey Hospital in Redhill. In the Diocesan Hearts on Fire Blog, she writes, "I have so many memories from the last intense weeks. Holding the phone to a patient's ear, while their loved one said goodbye, or so their Minister could pray with them. Quietly reading Compline to a priest who was reaching the end of his life. Offering prayers, as life support ended or just sitting quietly holding a patient's hand." This is where faith, hope and compassion meet head on.

Our reading concludes 'God's works will never be finished; and from him health spreads over all the earth'. Health and healing are gifts from God and today, especially today when we face this pandemic across the world, we thank God for all those who have been given the gift of healing and who give that gift 365 days a year in our Health Service.

Healing in the Bible is always seen as a free gift. Jesus gave freely of the gift of healing. Our lesson from Luke today tells of how Jesus healed on the Sabbath – the Jewish sacred day when no work was allowed – not even healing. Jesus challenged his accusers 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it.' So he healed reminding us that healing has no time limits. Jesus was there for the man with the withered hand just as the NHS offers healing for us around the clock.

The NHS is a caring organisation. It's a beacon to all of us demonstrating that the whole of society and particularly Christians need to be carers for those who need that healing touch – whether that's companionship to help with loneliness, a listening ear for those with mental health difficulties, food and clothing for the homeless or friendship offered to refugees. We may not have the gifts of physical healing – we may not be doctors or nurses – but we all can work together to heal society. We have all been given the free gift of care and love and compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves. Whether we use that gift or not is up to us – we can heal relationships and we can heal our community – it's all in our hands as followers of the greatest healer – Jesus Christ.

I want to finish with a poem about hands written by Michael Rosen for the 60th anniversary of the NHS. It's about caring and compassion from cradle to grave – the whole ethos of our NHS. Here it is:

***These are the hands that touch us first, feel your head, find the pulse
and make your bed.***

***These are the hands that tap your back, test the skin, hold your arm,
wheel the bin, change the bulb, fix the drip, pour the jug
replace your hip.***

***These are the hands that fill the bath, mop the floor, flick the switch,
soothe the sore, burn the swabs, give us a jab, throw out sharps,
design the lab.***

***And these are the hands that stop the leaks, empty the pan,
wipe the pipes, carry the can, clamp the veins, make the cast, log the dose
And touch us last.***

Prayer Pointers

For a renewed vision for our two churches of St Mary and St Francis. May we learn to work together in harmony and with our local community to further the Kingdom of Heaven here in West Wickham. May we not be afraid to take risks and step out in faith.

On the 72nd anniversary of the NHS we give thanks for all who dedicate their lives to healing. For all those who tend and support us when we are ill – all who work in our local hospitals, GP's, pharmacists and clinics. For all those training to use God's gift of healing in the NHS.

Continue to pray for our Government as lockdown eases and more people go back to work. For all MP's and ministers as they make decisions to help our economy recover. May all their decisions be wise and for the good of all.

For all those who have lost their jobs as more businesses in the past week have closed or entered administration. For all who work with the unemployed to help them find new work especially those in our local Job Centre in Bromley and for all who work to help people in debt – especially for Christians against Poverty.

For all those who have relatives and close friends in hospital who are not able to visit them because of Covid19 restrictions. May they have faith in those

treating them and may they know the peace of God that passes all understanding.