

# **A Service to Commemorate the Life of Florence Nightingale**

**13<sup>th</sup> May 2009**

**Westminster Abbey**

**The Dean**

*In a sermon addressed to 2,000 nurses and health professionals in Westminster Abbey on Florence Nightingale's anniversary, the Dean argued that spirituality was fundamental to health care and to healing, that it was advanced by chaplains and should be embedded in the training of health professionals. He argued for spiritual leadership in the health service.*

---

I cannot imagine competing in the marathon, although I have great admiration for those who do, some of them my age or older. Even more impressive are those who overcome tremendous disadvantages to complete the course. Last Saturday, Major Phil Packer, a Royal Military Police Officer, who, in February 2008, suffered catastrophic injuries during a rocket attack in Basra, Iraq and who was told he would never walk again, came home victorious in the Mall after almost two weeks. I hope the charity for which he was walking *Help for Heroes* achieves a real boost from his efforts. Yesterday here in the Abbey we celebrated the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Combat Stress* a charity which supports ex-service men and women suffering from less visible but equally devastating post-traumatic stress. One veteran spoke of how he had tried three times to take his life until he was courageous enough to ask for help. He has now found he can cope with his nightmares and flashbacks from a new perspective.

Those of us who have not suffered in these ways are full of admiration for the human spirit, for what can be achieved against the odds. The human

spirit is capable of extraordinary and apparently impossible feats. Human beings are not body and mind alone, but body, mind and spirit. Our spirit has a huge part to play in our health and wholeness – and in our healing, working alongside all the scientific brilliance of modern medicine. Those of you who unlike me are health professionals will have seen this countless times. You will be well aware of the fact that it is the interaction of physical and mental healing with the human spirit that leads to health and wholeness. Spiritual care and spiritual healing are therefore fundamental to the work of doctors, nurses and all health professionals. That is of course the message of the reading from St Mark's Gospel we heard earlier in the service. The man was helped by his friends. Jesus forgave the man his sins. The man was healed because his spirit was revived.

On her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, Florence Nightingale wrote to her brother-in-law Harry Verney in the following terms: "...I never see a soap bubble when I am washing my hands without thinking how good God was when He invented water and made us invent soap." We are familiar with her passionate commitment to cleanliness and sanitary conditions. But I believe this quotation reveals her spiritual motivation which was important to all that she was and achieved. In honouring Florence Nightingale here today, we honour nurses everywhere. I hope it might therefore also be the case that, in learning what gave her this powerful motivation, we can learn something of importance for nurses everywhere.

When Florence Nightingale was seventeen years old, she experienced what she described as a divine calling, a very definite sense of what God expected of her, from which she was never to turn away. The basis of her

religion she was to describe as follows: “that in all our actions, all our words, all our thoughts, the food upon which they are to live, the life in which they are to have their being, is to be the indwelling presence of God.” Not everyone nowadays would express their spiritual motivation like this; nor would everyone have done in Florence Nightingale’s day.

Discussion of spiritual matters and of faith is often strange to people. We tend to keep our spiritual motivation and our faith to ourselves. That is a mistake but not surprising. We keep it to ourselves for fear of offending others or out of fear of contradiction or because we are unsure of the right language in which to express elusive concepts. And yet the human spirit and spiritual health is fundamental to healing and wholeness. So every health professional, every doctor, every nurse needs to be easy and familiar with the language of the spirit in order to express the almost inexpressible. And I should say that offering to pray for someone is not a sin and should not be regarded as an offence. Forgive the outsider if I propose three means by which this vision of health professionals becoming and being easy and familiar with the language of the spirit can be brought into focus and reality.

The first means concerns the role of chaplaincy. Chaplains have a vital part to play in healing. They are the spirituality professional. Their role is of course to provide religious services for committed practitioners of their own faith. That is an inevitable requirement when people are away from their home environment. The role of chaplains is also to offer pastoral care to staff, patients and families who request it at times of extreme stress and demand. Such support is important and welcome and relieves pressure on other staff and colleagues. But there is much more. A key element in what they bring to the hospital community is their

professional familiarity with the language of the spirit. They help in training and support for those for whom that language is at first strange and unfamiliar. They make a vital contribution to the whole healing process by enabling every member of the healing community to get in touch with their own spirit.

The second means for realising this vision of spirituality at the heart of healing is to be found in the initial training and education process. It is a real strength of the work of the Florence Nightingale Foundation that it engages directly with those who educate and train health professionals. Through my own previous work with higher education institutions when I was the Church of England's chief education officer, I became aware of the high level of education of nurses and health professionals in universities which had been founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Church. I am interested to know how institutions with an explicitly religious origin and motivation address in initial education questions about the nurture of the human spirit and of faith. They should not only themselves address such questions educationally but also help others to do so. Spiritual development for health professionals should be included in all initial education in any academic context.

The third means, and again here the Florence Nightingale Foundation has an active role, is in the encouragement and development of leadership. It is obvious and fundamentally important that the leaders of a professional service should be people who are thoroughly instinct with the values of the profession. Leadership goes beyond maintaining effective systems management and keeping within budgetary constraint, important and necessary though these are: true leadership encompasses the spiritual and the moral, is positively exemplary for the community

and enables the whole community and everyone in it to get in touch with their own spirit, to develop as I have said easy familiarity with the language of the spirit. Spiritual leadership is necessary in the health service.

Florence Nightingale insisted that her own training school for nurses be open and inclusive. Women were admitted regardless of religious affiliation, and were there to provide nursing services rather than try for death bed conversions. Of course that was right and remains true. Yet she believed nurses needed the resources of God to do their work well. Promoting understanding and an easy familiarity with the language of the spirit and the vital importance of the human spirit in healing will honour her memory and advance her commitment to the health service into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.