

Florence Nightingale Service

Westminster Abbey

17th May 2017

The Dean

‘Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.’

This annual service at Westminster Abbey, held as near as possible to the birthday of Florence Nightingale, honours and celebrates the vocation of nursing and expresses warm support and encouragement for all those who work as nurses in the armed forces and in the hospitals and hospices and surgeries and communities of our land. That is a mighty throng of people who are committed to helping their fellow women and men and young people, children and babies, to be well, to live well and to die well.

Last year my sister-in-law died in St Christopher’s Hospice. Taken up though I was with her condition and experiencing the sadness of loss, when I was there again very soon after her death, I was also able to observe how patient, kind and warm was the nursing care she received, also extended to her immediate family. That story can be told countless times, as can other stories of nurses working in emergency circumstances, dealing again patiently and efficiently, perhaps at a time of extreme demand and stress, with people suffering appalling injuries.

Or again, the story can be re-told of nurses patiently and gently tending those with long-term illnesses. Over forty years ago, while I was training for the priesthood, I spent seven weeks one summer working as a nursing auxiliary in a hospital for people living with long-term physical disabilities. I may have done no good at all for the people I was supposed to be helping, either the nurses or the patients, but it was an immensely salutary experience for me. There too I observed the patience and

endurance of the nurses as well as of the patients and was impressed, indeed overwhelmed. Those experiences live with me to this day.

At a time when questions and criticisms and challenges are offered about health care and the National Health Service, the message needs to go out of praise and thanks for all those engaged in the tough and demanding role of nurses. That is the chief burden of my message today.

A moment ago I quoted a fragment from the poem *Ash Wednesday* by T S Eliot, who became a Christian, having been brought up without religion, and whose memorial is here in Poets' Corner. 'Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.' These words have played around my mind ever since I first heard them fifty years ago. 'Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.' Eliot wrote the poem in 1930 soon after his conversion to Christianity. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, the six week period of preparation for Easter, so reminds us of our sinfulness, our weakness, our dependence on God's grace. It is a time of reflection, of self-assessment, of facing up to ourselves.

One of the things about poetry is that the meaning is not always immediately obvious. What on earth might T S Eliot have meant by another line in the same poem, 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree'? He was once asked precisely that question. His answer was, 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree.' So, we have to work it out for ourselves.

'Teach us to care.' The first point is that this is a demand: teach us. It must be addressed to someone in particular. I think it is addressed to God. Teach us. But 'to care': does that mean to care about things or circumstances or people or ourselves; to care about what is going on in the world, about war and peace, the environment and slavery and poverty

and want? It might mean all that. But surely it could also mean to care for other people, as for example in nursing care. Now I am conscious of not wishing to caricature or misrepresent nursing care. Nursing is often demandingly technical, requiring a high level of knowledge, skills and understanding, engaging the mind, the memory, the intellect. But the point is to help people to be well, to live well and to die well. So the aim is to care for people, their body, their mind, their spirit.

‘Teach us to care’ could also be about ourselves. Teach us to care for ourselves. And we all know that if we are to care for other people, we must first ensure that we are ourselves healthy, that we are well. I like the reminder when you have the safety demonstration at the beginning of a flight that you must fit your own oxygen mask before you fit anyone else’s. That may seem selfish at face value. But of course it is right. That does not mean ‘me first’. It is just necessary.

But what about ‘not to care’. Perhaps it means not to care about anything we can do nothing about, to know the limits of our care. Or, possibly more likely, it means not to mind too much about the things that make life hard for us, to put up with our circumstances, even to make the best of them. This is tough but also good: to embrace our suffering.

The whole fragment is ‘Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.’ The sitting still I see as part of the caring for ourselves. Sitting still means sitting still and quiet. How often do we do that in busy and demanding lives? Almost certainly not enough. There is a new term creeping into the school curriculum. At one time the jargon was PSHE meaning personal, social and health education. That was then extended to mean personal, social, health and economic education. This is of course important for equipping children to live and flourish as adults. But the new term is ‘mindfulness’.

Mindfulness I see as very close to the Christian practice of meditation. Many years ago, an old priest, who had himself suffered unjust imprisonment in the former Rhodesia, described his own practice of meditation very early in the morning. He set aside an hour from about 5.00 am, as I remember. Incidentally I agree that is a little mad. But perhaps it was the only time he could find. He described the first period of his hour as looking and listening: sitting still and quiet, looking at the familiar things around him, listening to the sounds, perhaps of birds or of traffic, or of creaking of floorboards or of other people. That is not thinking or worrying or plotting or planning, though of course thoughts occur and can be embraced or absorbed. The point is just being in the moment. The next phase he called leaning and longing, leaning on God and longing for God, a much more focused awareness of God within us as well God beyond us, God immanent as well as transcendent, God who is deeper in us than our deepest self-awareness or self-knowledge, the very ground of our being, our fundamental reality. Leaning and longing. Then, perhaps only at the very end of his hour, loving: loving God, existing in the warmth and bliss of the knowledge of the love of God and God's love for us. This sense, this awareness, is not so easily attained but so well worth longing for.

Most of us might find it too tough to give up an hour each day to stillness and silence, but some time, if only ten minutes, sitting still and quiet, being mindful, looking and listening, leaning and longing, loving. We have to start somewhere.

Some years ago archbishop Desmond Tutu preached at this service and ended by asking everyone to give a huge round of applause for nurses everywhere. I won't repeat that. But perhaps for a moment we can sit in a gentle glow of thankfulness and love. God bless you all.