

Coach House Church BEACONS

THESE ARE THE HANDS

14 APRIL 2021

The recent COVID emergency has brought some really difficult times. I don't think many of us can say that given a choice we would want to go through the same experience again. That said, there have also been some striking examples of service and, some well deserved recognition of that service.

I have mentioned before that it can be a challenge deciding what to write about, so for this beacon I am grateful to a member of our fellowship who gave me a hand written copy of a poem by Michael Rosen. Michael wrote this poem after recovering from COVID as a way of expressing his appreciation for the care that he had received from the National Health Service. It is called "These are the Hands".

Reading this reminded me that the NHS was founded on Christian principles. From what we know about healthcare during the Greek and Roman periods it is clear that there wasn't much care for the weak or disabled, and certainly not for those outside of the nobility and wealthy classes, or for foreigners or outsiders. Of course caring for the sick wasn't a new thing in Jesus day, in the books of the law of Moses there are many instructions for healthcare, the most important of these being isolation. In reality the lock-down has been an application of the Law of Moses.

The gospel writer Luke was himself a doctor. He was well acquainted with medicines and the principles of looking after the sick, but it is the examples of Jesus that really changed peoples opinions. In his gospel

Luke wrote about how Jesus healed a man with leprosy, a paralysed man, the slave of a Roman officer, a boy suffering from seizures, a crippled woman, ten more lepers, and the High Priests servants severed ear.

It was Luke who wrote about the Good Samaritan. This example of healthcare was given by Jesus following His teaching about the greatest commandment. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself" The man asking the question did not like the idea of loving everybody so he asked "Who is my neighbour?" This is what Jesus said "A Jewish man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead by the road. By chance, a priest came along but when he saw the man lying on the road he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side of the road. Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man he felt compassion for him. Going over to him the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took the man to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the inn-keeper two silver coins telling him 'take care of him. If his bill comes to more than this I'll pay you next time I'm here'"

In this story we see that the Samaritan and the Jew were enemies, they hated each-other. Jesus was making the point that caring for people in need is not dependant on whether you like that person or not.

This story is foundational to the formation of the NHS as we can see so many of the principles of the NHS within the story. Firstly that we should care for all people whoever they are, wherever they are from, whatever they are suffering from. And secondly that this treatment should be provided at no cost to the person receiving it. In the story the Samaritan is the paramedic, the first aider, the donkey is the ambulance, the inn is the hospital, and the inn-keeper becomes the nurse.

In Matthews gospel Jesus speaks about judgement at the end of days. "Come, you who are blessed by the Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was sick and you cared for me" The righteous couldn't remember doing these simple things for Jesus himself so Jesus tells them "When you did these things for one of my brothers or sisters, you were doing it for me"

It was these founding principles that led to Christians to open the first hospitals. Until this time sick people had largely been cared for in their own homes. Early Christians continued to put into practice the Laws of Moses and the examples of Jesus but this had to be done in secret because of the persecution they were under. It wasn't until the year 311, when the emperor Constantine issued his first edict of toleration, that Christians were able to make public expression of their care for the sick. Small hospices sprang up in cities with larger Christian populations and in the year 369 St Basil of Caeseria founded a 300 bed hospital. This hospital cared for the disabled as well as victims of the plague. There were wards for travellers and lepers as well as a separate section for older people.

Since this first hospital Christians have been at the forefront of founding new hospitals, as well as raising funds to support these ventures, and this has continued right up to this day.

Unfortunately in the middle ages during the reign of Henry the 8th, because a lot of the hospitals were based in or near monasteries, many were shut down. Provision for healthcare was given over to the leaders of towns and cities which lead to an inevitable decline in provision. Fortunately in the 18th century England was experiencing a Christian revival under the preaching of people like George Whitfield and John Wesley, and this led to a revival in healthcare. New hospitals were founded and new ways of practising introduced. The idea for GP surgeries came from the "dispensing movement", a Christian initiative to bring better healthcare into poor areas of overcrowded cities.

Christian principles were still very much in force in 1948 when the NHS was founded but, sadly, recently, the NHS has distanced itself from its Christian roots, moving towards secular humanitarianism instead. A popular modern commentator has even suggested that the NHS meets the nations spiritual needs thus rendering the church redundant. Whilst the NHS is busy trying to return itself to the era of Henry 8th, God is busy appointing people to minister in the way that He taught. Many staff in the NHS do what they do because they are called by God. The NHS still has a network of chaplains who minister tirelessly to those in need.

Other ministers and pastors are still allowed mostly unrestricted access to those under their care, so we need to thank God that He has kept these doors open, but we must also recognise that we have our own part to play.

If anyone is sick or in need, and we visit them or provide for them, then we are doing this as if we were doing it to Jesus.

The staff of the NHS are worthy of our thanks for the hard work they do, but it is to Jesus that we owe the real thanks because He is the true provider of the inspiration, wisdom and strength that make this wonderful system possible.



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