

## **Nursing with heart: the gift of intensive care**

*A sermon for International Nurses' Day, reflecting upon Bible readings from Acts 10: 44 – 48, and John 15: 9 - 17*

The first person to speak to me as I awoke from open-heart surgery for an aortic valve replacement was an intensive care nurse assigned to look after me. Anne told me it was important that I be turned over every four hours so that fluid didn't build up on my lungs. But because I was weak from surgery and its fearful impact on my ribs, I could barely move. So Anne and another nurse took the edge of the sheet I was lying on and gently folded it over me so that I was wrapped in a sling. The procedure was explained to me, then one nurse rocked me gently backwards and forwards from behind while the other held the fold of the sheet firmly and in front of me. On the count of three, I was rolled over onto my other side. Beautiful! I had rolled over in bed with two nurses helping me. It is difficult to describe how dreadful it felt to feel so helpless and hopeless, while at the same time feeling grateful beyond words for being cared for so gently, compassionately and respectfully. This paradox is at the heart of my epiphany in the hands of intensive care ward nurses at the Alfred Hospital.

The gospel we heard read is a portion of John's long account of Jesus' teaching his disciples at his last meal with them before his crucifixion. As the shadow of Jesus' death falls over these verses, he speaks more insistently about God's love, urging the disciples to abide in his love for them, just as he has been sustained by God's love for him. There was something about living under the shadow of death in undergoing open-heart surgery that radically clarified what was of ultimate importance in my life.

Jesus leaves us in no doubt that what is of ultimate importance in his life is God's love for him. Then he urges his disciples to believe that he has shared this same love with them. Finally he instructs his disciples that they may abide in that love. You can rest in that love. You can know what is of ultimate importance in your life. It is simply this – it is of ultimate importance to know God's love for you as you are, even in your abject helplessness and hopelessness.

I had been a minister twenty years, but I had to experience the gift of intensive care nursing to learn what Jesus was really teaching his followers. I had never thought I could be loveable when I was weak and powerless. I had never expected that I could receive such intensive care when I was helpless and hopeless.

As a minister I knew a lot about God's love – in my head. I prided myself on my quick mind, my ability to reason, and think things through. But in the intensive care ward, the nurses who cared for me didn't know me from Adam – yet in their gentle compassionate touch I discovered God's love for my body – for my broken and feeble body!

It was in this time when I was too sick and too tired to think, that I experienced the love that Jesus taught us about – unconditional love. Love without strings. Love that spoke to the depths of body and soul. Love that you can rest in because it is life affirming and life giving.

From that experience of intensive care nursing, something fundamental changed within me. I knew for the first time a unity of body, mind and spirit. I knew I was being made whole. I knew in a new way I was being invited to transcend the traditional masculinity I had grown up with that compartmentalised mind and body and spirit in separate parts of my life.

The rather strange-sounding passage from the book of Acts read earlier may be saying something similar about how God's spirit breaks down the barriers we humans construct to separate people from each other. Perhaps it is also speaking to us about the barriers we

create to even divide our individual lives into fragments – and sadly for so many men, to divide our emotions from our minds, and separate our spirit from our bodies into compartments that are kept separate from each other.

The early Church comprised Jews who had converted to Christianity. Then over time the issue arose as to whether non-Jews could become Christians. Could Gentiles who were regarded as unclean join the newly formed Jewish Christian church if they became Christians? While the Jewish Christians debated the matter, the Acts account suggests that God took the debate out of their hands, and we read, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard (God’s) word. The circumcised (Jewish) believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” (10:44-45). Here, God’s intention for all people is realised – we are to live in unity, in a spirit of oneness where all barriers have been overcome. This unity creates the tiny church as a new social and political reality that was radically different from the world around it – a world still characterised by barriers and division and conflict.

Both the new reality in the early Church, and the new reality for my life from intensive care nursing, spring from the same source. They are both gifts of God’s love, or as the book of Acts says, God’s Spirit. They are both gifts of healing, for it is a characteristic of God’s love to draw together and make whole what has been unjustly divided. It is a characteristic of God’s love to forgive what has been hidden and buried by shame, to reconcile what has been forced apart through fear and mistrust. Not only had my heart been made healthy with a new valve, it had also been healed by the gift of intensive care nursing.

My epiphany in intensive care was to know God’s healing love in my body and soul as if for the first time. As I have sought to abide in this grace, I have become more and more convinced that the fundamental commitment Christ wants of people is to live together in love. Jesus says it simply and without qualification – ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’ (15:12)

I am grateful beyond words that nurses today are highly qualified and competent to operate the high tech equipment that was used in my operation and on the wards. But the thing that changed my life was a gentle and compassionate touch by a nurse I had never met at a time of the most abject and utter helplessness in my life. I remember the physicality of being nursed most clearly – being given a simple ice cube to suck to see if I could eat, ‘1, 2, and breathe away’ while removing potentially painful tubes, being shown how to hold a pillow to my chest so I could minimise the pain while coughing up unwanted mucus from my lungs – and during all this being treated with compassion and dignity. When Jesus said “you are my friends if you do what I command you” (15:14) he may well have been speaking about the cardiac care nurses who nursed me after open-heart surgery.

When I eventually returned to work, I often found it difficult to rest in the new truth that had been shown to me. One of the first things I did, after about two months, was to go to a weeklong silent retreat with the Jesuits. I next began to meet regularly each month with a spiritual director to help me develop my awareness of God’s presence in my life, in my body and soul. This has been a remarkably enriching journey.

A second thing I did was to join a community choir. I knew that my heart wanted to sing, and the choir I joined created that same sense of unconditional acceptance I had experienced in intensive care. And all the while since my time in intensive care, I was borne along by a deep sense of gratitude for the nursing care I had received. Then one day in May 1998, I read a brief newspaper account that a Nurses’ Choir had sung at an International Nurses’ Day event for the ANF. A year later, the Nurses Choir – now the

Keytones Choir - sang at the first International Nurses Day service held here at St. George's.

Jesus says – 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' (15:11) The intention of God's healing love for our broken world is joy. The gift of God's unconditional love is so that you may be lifted up as I was lifted up from helpless and powerlessness into the liberating lightness of holy joy. Life lived in gratitude and joy will bear fruit. You are the music. Today, I declare to you that the service given to others in love is God's path to joy and fruitful living. This is the wisdom that Florence Nightingale knew was at the heart of nursing. May this wisdom be your joy and your song, sustaining you until our world can live as one in unity and love.

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