

**A sermon prepared by Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry, on the occasion of The Service of Thanksgiving for the work of the NHS in Coventry Cathedral on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021  
(and preached in his absence by the Reverend Simon Betteridge because of the Bishop's absence due to COVID-19).**

Readings: Isaiah 65.17-25; Mark 1. 40-45 and 3.7-10.

Dear Friends who care for us, was this ever your experience: the experience of Jesus? You met a person who was suffering with an illness, and you were 'moved with pity'. Your heart went out to them and you said – like Jesus – '*I do choose to help you, to do everything I can and give everything I am so that you can be well again*'.

I know you have felt like that and that it was that compassion and that desire to make a difference to a person's life that drew you into your healing work in the NHS. I have heard you speak of your call, your vocation to health and healing; and I have been moved by your dedication to the care of others.

And do you still have those moments, when you are totally focused on the person before you and somehow you manage to block out the noise of all those competing demands and give your attention solely to this one person – the person before you, the person in need? And be concerned – like Jesus – for their spiritual well-being and

their re-entry into society, careful about you hand them over to other professionals, members of the community and family.

I know you still have those moments of attention on one person. My mother has been in hospital in Chichester for the last week. I've seen the kind and focused attention she's received. Every time I've 'phoned the ward to speak to her I've been worried the nurses would tell me they are too busy to deal with an anxious son. But every time, they have been patient with me. 'Auriol, here's your son', they've said as they 've walked from the doctors' desk to her bed and given her the phone. They called my mother by her name and were gentle with their 92-year-old patient and her anxious son. My mother will remain in their hands – your hands – when she moves back into her little flat to be looked after three times a day by an NHS care package.

But have you also experienced what Jesus experienced? People coming from every quarter, people coming in great numbers from perhaps not 'Judea and Jerusalem and the surrounding region' but from every part of Coventry, Rugby, Nuneaton, Warwick, Warwickshire, the whole West Midlands, the nation – and far and wide, Afghanistan, perhaps.

I know you have over these Covid months. I know your reputation – like Jesus' – has spread far and wide and that

people have been sent to you from different parts of the country.

And have you felt – like Jesus – that you might be crushed by all this need, by these expectations that were placed upon you, by this pandemic that was raging through our land with such devastation? Did you feel – like Jesus – overwhelmed by all those who had diseases who pressed upon him so that they could touch him, and be healed?

I suspect you have at times over these months felt like that. I've been to Covid wards and I've seen the extraordinary buzz of activity. I've heard about the long shifts. I've been amazed by the stories of Covid's early days when so little was known about it and how you had to adapt all your systems and re-learn so much of your care. I've almost smelt the adrenaline as you've drawn on every energy within you to preserve the lives of those who have come to you. I've listened to you as you've shared some of the relentless strain with me and the deep pain of seeing people die before you and the agony of feeling helpless despite all your training.

As the Dean has said, this service is to thank God for you and to thank you – on behalf of God – for everything you are and for everything you have done for us over these months. You have been through – and continue to endure – the most remarkable period in the history of the health of

our country. You have prevailed, and we are deeply grateful.

I know that you who work in the NHS in whatever way, serving the *public health* of society, share not only in compassion for individuals who are sick, and in determination to respond to the needs of the tens of thousands who come to you for help and healing, but that you also share in a vision for contemporary society that – I dare say – is very similar to the ancient prophecy that we heard earlier from a society two and half thousand years ago. It is a prophecy that tells of the sort of society God wants for his people, for the world. It is a prophecy of a just and fair society that brings the Shalom of God – peace and health for all.

‘No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime’, says the prophet.

And he knew – like you knew, like Jesus knew – that that sort of quality of life comes not just from better methods of healing but from a culture of prevention of illness and a society of justice.

‘They shall build their house and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit:  
they shall not plant and another eat.’

Here is a vision for society in which everyone flourishes and where the causes of illness – poverty, diet, inequality – are addressed before they become the symptoms of illness.

And some of that begins with you yourselves: that you have good conditions of work and employment; that you are paid fairly in a way that reflects all you do for others. The matters of NHS pay and funding of the NHS matter to God. God knows that health derives from justice. And the responsibility of ensuring you are properly paid, and your hospitals and clinics fairly funded belongs to us all.

And those of us in our different spheres of influence – political, religious, education, business etc – are called to work with you and on your behalf for the sort of society of which the prophet dreamt and God promised:

A society where:

‘no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress’.

As we gather this day to thank God for you and, in the name of God, to thank you for all you do every day, every minute – and especially over these last Covid months, may I encourage you to do three things: they are very simple but also not always easy.

First, may I encourage you to know that God’s blessing is upon you. God – like Jesus and like you – says, ‘I do

choose to make people well'. You are on the same side.

Second, may I encourage you to receive God's blessing – there will be an opportunity for that at the end of this service – but God is ready to bless you every day. All you need to do is to be open to receive that blessing.

Third, may I encourage you to ask God for strength when you are tired, hope when you despair, compassion where your heart is growing hard and moments of joy when it is all feeling a bit grim.

Where God is different from you and from me is that God never tires of those who press upon him seeking help and healing and hope. God is always there for you.

May you know that God is with you.