

## SERMON

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020

The Bishop of London

### John 14:1-14

#### Acts of the Apostles. (7.55-end)

It would be a very unusual person who has not felt fear over the last few months. Before the pandemic, we had as a society begun to think that we were in control. What is happening around us tells us that we are not – and maybe we never have been. The reality of not being in control means that, at times, we cannot avoid being overwhelmed.

Of course, we are all very different people, some of us will worry more than others. Some of us will experience anxiety more than others, that is the variety of life. Here in our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us not to be troubled and to trust in him. Now he's not telling us, 'do not be concerned' but rather he is encouraging us to hope.

Hope is not about optimism. It is about a conviction concerning the future which leaps into our present in such a way that we feel secure in the here and now. It makes us ready for God's future; sure, that he will save us, that death does not have the last word, and that the best is yet to come.

Hope is stored up for us in heaven and breaks into our present like shafts of sunlight. We have seen that hope break through during this storm. We have seen it in the nurse who, despite their fears, goes back work day after day to care for the sick. It looks like the doctor who has stepped out of their field to support their colleagues under stress; but it is also seen in the shopkeeper who puts together bags of hand gels and antiseptic wipes and distributes them free to the vulnerable in their community. It looks like those of us who have taken action to stay at home and physically distance ourselves - it is the person who has put a note through their neighbours' door asking if they need help.

This year is the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. It would have been filled with events to celebrate their contribution to health and society. Instead, Covid-19 means that this year is filled with acts of compassion done by nurses and midwives, for which we are enormously grateful.

This year was chosen because it marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth. I do not know what image comes to your mind when you think of Florence Nightingale. I suspect it is the image of her holding a lamp but Florence was much more than that. Florence was shaped by two things: her faith and the Crimean War.

Born in Florence, she was baptized into the Church of England, and she made no secret of an explicit calling from God – a call to service. God, for Florence in the words of our Psalm, was her refuge and fortress to save. She believed that God wanted to change the world.

The Church of England then, as it does now, has a liturgy for the deliverance from plague, pestilence and famine. Florence believed that we should not only pray for deliverance, but we should work to bring deliverance. She wrote:

*It did strike me as odd, that sometimes we should pray to be delivered from 'plague, pestilence and famine' when all the sewers ran into the Thames. I thought that Cholera came that we might remove the causes and not pray that God would remove the Cholera.*

She believed that a life of prayer was there to support our work in the world and Jesus suggests in our reading that once he had departed, those of us who follow him will do greater works than he had done. As Christians we carry on his work.

My Christian faith was my motivation to become a nurse like so many others, then and today. Training at the Nightingale School of Nursing, I saw my actions as demonstrating those of a loving God.

Florence's faith, her call to service, was to save lives and her opportunity to save lives came in the Crimean War. She was like nurses in all wars – from World War Two which we mark today with VE Day, through to our efforts against Covid-19 – nurses who take on new roles and sacrifice their own freedom for others.

In the Crimea, most of the soldiers died from disease, not bullets. Florence herself nearly died when she came down with some form of typhus, as so many nurses did.

Her experience of poor infection control led Florence to develop and use statistics for epidemiology.

Her methodical advice was, and remains, superb and was used for infection control, hospital design and a public health system. She was confident that scientific research could lead to social betterment.

Could we have imagined celebrating the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife in a year where nurses and other healthcare professionals have had to put themselves again in the frontline in a battle against another infection? They have had to take on new roles, they've had to and step up to think of others before themselves – just as Stephen in our reading this morning did, in the face of death.

Florence Nightingale knew about the long-term cost of her experiences and that the hardest of challenges could only be overcome with the support of others. If we are going to really celebrate nurses and midwives this year, we need to support them through the cost that they have paid, and to continue to support them when all this is over.

And we, who are in the midst of this storm, should hear the words of Jesus:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; and also trust in me.*

Amen.