

## Hospital Sunday

Sunday 16 August

*A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Rosemary Maries.*

*Readings: 1 Kings 3:15-28 Psalm 72 Eph 6:1-9*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you for inviting me here on this Hospital Sunday. I'll be speaking out of my own experience today but I speak on behalf of all healthcare chaplains. I also bring you greetings from the people of St Wilfred's Mt Duneed and St Cuthbert's Grovedale where I've spoken this morning.

Our Psalm this evening is a wonderful song of Solomon of God's righteousness and his generous goodness. And thank you choir for your gifts shared with us in such beautiful singing.

Solomon asks for blessing from God in line with the qualities of God and of course the qualities that we see in Jesus, God with us - for righteousness, justice, for the abundance of peace, that the poor and needy will be cared for and safe.

From the verses of Psalm 72 we've heard this evening and in the rest of the psalm which you may like to read another time, there's a strong sense of pattern and order, a predicted reliability of how things should be and will be and a great sense of the abundance of God's generous goodness.

For patients, often life has been abundant, ordered and predictably reliable. For people of faith, they knew and trusted in God's generous goodness.

As we heard read from the book of Kings this evening, of the confronting nature of the death of a baby in the night, so shocking can be the sudden change for people for whom life has held much potential and promised abundance. In the further betrayal of the woman who swapped babies, so people can feel betrayed by their own bodies with the onset of serious illness. A diagnosis can change a life and the life of a family in a few spoken words - maybe permanently - and questions arise such as:

I knew who I was but who am I now?

What is now my purpose and meaning in life?

What did I do to deserve this?

Why is God doing this to me?

Is there a God?

For Chaplains also, the pattern and order indicated in the Psalm can hold some longing. The days are rare when I can steadily work my way through my list and plan for the day. All can change in an instant with, among other things: a call on the duty pager; a chance meeting by the lifts; a phone call from an out of town Parish Priest; a nurse saying, "Mr Smith has had bad news, he doesn't have a faith, but is very upset. Can you come?"

I arrived at the hospital one morning and was walking along the corridor past the operating theatres when a nurse called me over to a patient just being wheeled in. She said, "The family asked to call a priest for prayer but there wasn't time, perhaps you could....?" There, just inside the entrance to the operating theatre with my backpack still on attendants stepped away just for a brief moment and gave us a little sacred space for God's blessing.....and I continued on my way.

So how do we approach the uncertainties in our day? How do we connect with those who are searching and questioning? Primarily the answer is the same as the content of our Psalm – trust in God's generous goodness.

And so, as a pastoral care team – staff and volunteers we begin the day in prayer, trusting those in need and ourselves to God's generous goodness. I always visit knowing that God's love is for each and every person. Everyone is special and precious to God, no one any more or less than any other, and we as chaplains, we as Christians, we as fellow human beings are called to love and care for each and every person. To listen with respect and compassion offering comfort and support whether Christian or otherwise.

We're given the opportunity to sow a seed of love whatever that means in each particular circumstance, to offer water to a thirsty soul, to feed a spiritual hunger, though we rarely know how this plays out as patients leave and mostly we hear no more. However, the ministry is God's, we don't really need to know. We're simply called to be present, to be God's person, in God's place, for this particular time. So how does this work out in practical ministry?

We have a Communion service every Sunday Morning in the hospital where we have the privilege of broadcasting our faith, making an announcement over the PA system inviting all to come. I had to smile as I was coming here tonight to hear our Cathedral bells pealing and wondered how that would go down over the hospital PA! Nice I think.

People come who are church members from any number of denominations. People come who've never been to church before or haven't been for many years. You might say we offer a weekly 'Back to Church Sunday'. Some of those searching for answers, for healing, peace, forgiveness, hope, for God, come.

They come in their hospital gowns or pyjamas which some initially find not quite 'proper'. I wonder how you'd feel coming to church in your pj's?? Maybe in the future hospital chaplaincy Sunday should be a 'come in your jamas' day. My reassurance to the hospital gown pilgrims

is drawn from a hymn we often sing and have just sung together: 'Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy one is here'. Wherever we are, however we're dressed, we are the

Church, the body of Christ gathered. God is present and wherever God is present, we are surely on holy ground.

Sunday morning Communion isn't always contained to the Service itself. I usually take communion to bedsides and sometimes we have unexpected requests. One Sunday I walked 'Carol', a faithful Anglican lady back to the psychiatric ward. When we arrived, I was asked by another patient, if she could receive Communion. We sat in the dining room in the midst of comings and goings. I laid out cloth, cross, Bible, chalice and paten on the table. During the service others arrived till we were a group of seven, reading the Bible, singing, praying and receiving the Sacrament. Staff later expressed their amazement at the makeup of the group who shared the peace together. Holy Ground.

I visit regularly in the Psychiatric Unit, where I also offer a fortnightly 'Exploring Spirituality' group. God and Christian faith are part of the conversation, but the intent of the group is an exploration of possibilities which patients may choose to draw on and I'm always available for further discussion afterwards.

Another regular for me, assisted by faithful volunteers, is a Communion Service at the Aged Care Hostels and the monthly Hymn Singing sessions. It's inspiring to worship with these faithful men and women, to honour and respect their often long lives of faith and service, to offer them the blessed Sacrament on the holy ground of *their* community dining room.

Apart from these and other regular appointments, most of my time is spent in 1:1 visits with patients, families and staff in the acute hospital setting, and this is where my lists and plans often need to be discarded.

'Colin' was on my Anglican list of patients one day. When I saw him across the ward, in his builders singlet and boxer shorts I'm afraid to say I turned and left, judging that we'd have nothing in common and he'd want nothing to do with pastoral care. God brought me to a full stop in the passage. One of the prayers we sometimes pray at the beginning of our day includes the words:

'and if today we may be the means by which you answer the prayers of others, then may you find us neither deaf nor defiant, but keen and open to fulfill your purpose'

*A Wee Worship Book, © 1999 Wild Goose Resource Group, p23*

When I turned and went back Colin said, "Thank God you're here! I've been wanting to talk to someone from the church." Colin told me he'd died, seen himself walking towards an open door which had then shut as he heard God say, "No. It's not your time yet". He hadn't been in a church since he was a child and he wanted me to tell him about God.

Over the months I saw him, he came to a simple, trusting, open faith in Jesus. He went from wanting the curtain around his bed for prayer and communion, to leaving it open, to asking his roommates to join us, bringing them to the Chapel and telling them what God was doing in his life. It was a great privilege to be God's person to Colin. To be brought to him, initially somewhat fearfully, so he might find answers to his question of 'Who is God?'

And who knows how many lives have been changed by Colin's invitations and openness. Colin was one patient on my list.

My Anglican list has an average of 70 patients a day and a turnover of 25 a day, an impossible number to visit, even without the others I'm called to see. So please if you or loved ones are in hospital and you'd like to see a chaplain, please ask. We feel sad when we hear that we've missed people who were hoping a chaplain would visit.

One day, the daughter of an elderly patient came to my office to ask for a chaplain. Her Mum had been in the hospital for 5 days and I hadn't visited. The daughter said that she and her siblings didn't have a Christian faith but their Mum did and had been very involved in the Anglican Church. The children thought, bless them, that even though she seemed unconscious, she would receive comfort being surrounded in prayer and familiar Bible readings.

I spent a few precious days with this 100 year old and her loving children. I discovered in one visit that she'd been a long term Mothers' Union member so we included the Mothers' Union prayer in our prayer times around her bed. When their mother died early one morning the family asked me to be paged to offer a final blessing, allowing me also to pray for and bless them as they recognized this is what Mum would have asked for could she have done so. We stood together on Holy Ground, in peace, with a tangible sense of God's generous goodness in the life and death of this faithful lady.

Ministry in hospitals is rarely a private affair. It's a great honour and privilege to be able to express our faith within the busyness of life on the ward. Having the curtain around a bed for prayer or communion doesn't cut out any noise in either direction, but does create a 'sacred space', an awareness of holy ground in the everyday. This to me is Christian living. Not removed from the world but living our Christian faith in full view and hearing of others.

Hospital Chaplaincy is a ministry of presence interwoven in the everyday operation of the wards, often with spoken words, prayer, and sacrament as I've shared. But there are times when there a very few words that can be said.

One of the most painful times is when a baby or child has died. The anguish of parents at times like these is heart and soul wrenching and there simply are no words to ease the pain. It's not a time to talk about God's presence in the pain, nor to pray with people unless there's some clear indication this is appropriate. I have met adults who have turned away from God when people have offered platitudes about God's plan for this child who has died, saying that if God could do such a thing as this they wanted nothing to do with him.

Often to sit close in silence, to listen, to weep, being a support and strength to lean on, is the best we can offer, holding for grieving parents, in our presence, God's presence, love and compassion. Sometimes it can be hours and hours before parents are able, never ready, to say goodbye to their child. It's in these times of raw grief that as chaplains we especially are held and strengthened by the prayers of others and the assurance of God's generous goodness, his love and compassion for all who suffer. Hospital ministry can be very challenging, at times heartbreaking, but at the same time a humble privilege to be

invited in to those deep places of pain and struggle to be God's person when the need is great.

There are of course times of celebration also: as patients recover and go home; sitting in a sunroom sharing communion with view over sea and sky, sun streaming in the windows, playful visits in the children's ward, visiting the maternity ward and blessing newborn babies. There was one year when we had a Mum and Dad and their baby boy, not quite one day old in our Christmas Morning Service. Such a joy and blessing for all present.

We work in some respect on the edges of the church, but we don't see that what we do as chaplains is isolated from the ministry of Cathedral and parishes, rather that we're an extension of your ministry and your care for all God's people. He calls each of us to be his people where he has placed us, using the gifts he has given us. Together we are the body of Christ.

Please pray for chaplains that we may be wise stewards of the time we are given, wise and compassionate in our approach to those in need; that others may be enabled to join this vital ministry; that we may be sustained when energy is low and demand is high that we will be open to the leading of God's Spirit. Thank you to those who already do this.

May God bless you in all you do.

The Lord be with you.