

It's hard to imagine what our Country would be like without the National Health Service. Over the past 72 years it has become one of the defining features of our country, embodying the critically important value of equity - irrespective of class, or education, or wealth, or culture. In the UK we can be rightly proud of the National Health Service, funded through taxes.

In these past months of lockdown, and the management of the pandemic, our NHS has continued to deliver an amazing service, often at great cost to the individual workers, be they consultants, doctors, nurses, paramedics, administrators, porters and care workers. The NHS and it's staff have borne the brunt of the challenges that the pandemic has brought and those staff continue to be on the front-line.

For 10 weeks many of us have shared in that symbolic action of public clapping as a way of expressing our appreciation and gratitude. We've made rainbows and painted messages on the roads outside hospitals. Shops have opened at special times just for NHS workers.

As part of the Government's emergency response, in the early days of the pandemic, seven critical-care Covid Hospitals were hastily created in exhibition centres and other places. They are called Nightingale hospitals after Florence Nightingale. There is also a post-Covid rehabilitation facility called the Seacole Centre named after Mary Seacole.

Both Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole are prominent figures in nursing history and role models in the NHS.

**Mary Seacole** was a pioneering nurse and heroine of the Crimean War, who as a woman of mixed race is today celebrated as an inspiration for the many people, from different ethnic backgrounds, who sustain our NHS. She was born in Jamaica in 1805 to a Scottish soldier and Jamaican mother. Mary learned her nursing skills from her mother who kept a boarding house for invalid soldiers. She was a great traveller, and visited other parts of the Caribbean, as well as Central America and Britain. On these trips, she complemented her knowledge of traditional medicine with European medical ideas. Mary approached the War Office, asking to be sent as an army nurse to the Crimea. She was refused, but undaunted, funded her own trip to the Crimea where she established the 'British Hotel' near Balaclava for sick and convalescent officers. She also visited the battlefield, sometimes under fire, to nurse the wounded, and became known as 'Mother Seacole'.

**Florence Nightingale** was born in 1820 into a wealthy family. In the face of their opposition, she insisted that she wished to train in nursing. She did finally achieve her wish and headed up her own private nursing institute in London. Her efforts at improving conditions for the wounded during the Crimean War won her great acclaim and she devoted the rest of her life to reforming nursing care. Her school at St Thomas's Hospital became significant in helping to elevate nursing into a profession.

In nursing, Mary and Florence were pioneer role models for what has become a highly skilled and respected profession.

For Christians Jesus is much, much more than a pioneering role model but he is someone that we are encouraged to imitate and to follow. And in today's Gospel Jesus gives us a very vivid picture of how we are to walk in his footsteps and to be like him.

Verse 29 – “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.”

Here Jesus is picturing two oxen in the field; perhaps he was pointing to them for the crowd to see. Two oxen, working together in tandem. Two oxen able to work together in tandem because they are connected – they are yoked together. The wooden beam connects the two and enables them to act in a united way to achieve the purpose of ploughing the earth.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” by walking with me; by working with me. Remain connected so that we can accomplish the task together.

Jesus calls us to be so intimately connected with him that we cannot do anything in our own strength; we can only do it with him.

As you look at the yoked oxen you see how easy the task of ploughing becomes. Because they are working in partnership; because they are yoked together they can plough the field. What a way to learn!

But it is interesting to note that this being yoked to him is an offer. It is a gift. It is something which we need to accept and receive. We are invited by Jesus to be yoked to him so that we can learn from him.

And he goes further to explain that this being yoked to him is easy and joyful – “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”.

Eugene Peterson, in “the Bible in Contemporary language” has Jesus in the exact same verses saying:

“Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”

I love that! “Learn the unforced rhythms of grace”.

That's the kind of Christian faith and practice that I need. This is what I pray for. This is what I want to receive as God's gift to me. I want to walk in step with Jesus. I want to be and act in tandem with him. I want to serve others with generosity and compassion and not begrudgingly because I feel that I “ought” or that I “should”.

Being yoked to Jesus is the way to go!

And so I pray for myself and for you that we might daily accept the gift of being yoked to Jesus. I pray that we might daily be intimately connected to Jesus that we cannot do anything in our own strength and can only do things in partnership with him.

“Lord thank you for being beside me.

Thank you for offering to guide me and teach me.

I want to “learn the unforced rhythms of grace” by being yoked to you.”

Amen