

## **MEDWAY MARITIME HOSPITAL THANKSGIVING SERVICE**

Metaphors shape how we see things. From the start of the pandemic, the most popular one was of a war against Covid. Some objected to this because they felt it was too militaristic and, in any case, war is waged against sentient beings with whom you can negotiate. But there is another way of looking at this. Every war has a front line. Covid did. And you were on it. The front line in war is visceral, traumatic, unsparing. Strong bonds are formed among exhausted, well-trained professionals whose work each day is volatile and unpredictable. Professionals who know that the most dangerous enemy of all is the one you can't see coming. And around them, friends, colleagues and civilians are cut down before their time.

Meanwhile, back from the front line, others are shielded from its effects and may find it hard to grasp the horror that is unfolding elsewhere. A place where some even feel able to minimise or disbelieve reports from the front line.

War produces PTSD, a trigger waiting to be pulled at any moment. And it imposes moral injury, where you know what your values are, but are prevented by circumstances from calling on them.

As it happens, the Germans used a different metaphor for the pandemic. It was all about preventing the dam from bursting. Germans may feel they have good reasons for avoiding metaphors about war, and their choice was a good one. When dams begin to crack, people run from one point to another to try and relieve the stress; to keep it from bursting altogether and overwhelming everything in its path. No sooner is one crack repaired than another one opens up. It may be a useful metaphor for describing how healthcare workers feel, too. In your own lives through this pandemic, you have been repairing the cracks in your emotions as you go along, trying to stay on top of things and not to think about the size and power of the thing on the other side of the dam.

That is a huge burden to bear.

This service is about three things.

First up, it's so the surrounding community to tell you how grateful we are for you did – and continue to do – to keep this virus at bay and to attend to the other ailments that mounted around you as you gave necessary attention to Covid. Brave, well-trained soldiers advance towards that which menaces them, in order to neutralise the threat. You did that. Day after day, you got up and went to work, putting yourself at risk in the place in our community where Covid was most infectious, most lethal. You went towards the danger. People who show bravery can be embarrassed when others point it out. We imagine it should be about someone else or that it's simply a job to be done. Courage is a choice. It's not about how you feel inside. Most people are afraid in a crisis. It's the conscious decision to go towards the danger. Thank you for doing that. The consequences for the rest of us if you hadn't do not bear thinking about.

The second thing about today is the wish we have to dignify and validate your feelings. These emotions may vary in their intensity and effect in each person,

but the cumulative burden you share today probably is like a dam, held in but ready to burst. For several centuries, our culture has distinguished between body and mind. As healthcare professionals, you'll know that's actually a deceit. Our minds, our emotions, have a huge impact on our bodies. As that increasingly well known book by Bessel Van Der Kolk has it: the body keeps the score. And that score will continue to mount. In a rushed, unreflective society, we need spaces where we can give attention to those feelings, where they can be externalised in rituals. Where they can be affirmed by others as natural, as OK, as being properly human.

This church offers this space. Some of you will believe in God, some of you won't, some may not be sure. That's OK. This service is not coercive, it's a way of expressing our love and our shared humanity. Of giving space for that indefinable spiritual frequency we know is there. Of allowing its exploration.

And in the midst of those powerful, unpredictable emotions, you should be proud of who you are and what you do in life. In one of the stories that Jesus told, he showed how the practical care of others receives God's approval. And not just approval. For in caring for others, we care for Christ himself:

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25:35-36)*

I was sick and you took care of me.

The overwhelming pressure that medical staff faced as hospitals were filled would have impacted on you in ways the rest of us can only imagine. Exhaustion and burn out can eventually follow when no matter how hard you work, the needs keep piling up like a developing motorway jam. But you kept caring for the person and for Jesus himself. I hope and pray that medical staff who fall sick now will find gentle hands and listening ears to care for them in return.

The third thing about this service is our wish for greater respect for those who care. Major crises reshape how we think about our common life. Highly individual ways of thinking about the world are inadequate after a pandemic has struck. Caring itself is ripe for re-evaluation. John Kennedy, of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has said:

*Why, if care for our most vulnerable and frail is so important, so fundamental to our sense of righteousness, do we treat those who provide care so badly?*

That is a question we need to stay with and not skirt round. The clap for carers was well meant and of its time, but will be patronising if used again without some meaningful changes. And in this lies the life of the care home. What are we saying about the value of old people when many of those who look after them are paid the minimum wage? We know in our hearts that some things are not right. Finger pointing comes easily. Joining hands in common cause is the harder, more democratic task.

We like our stories to start with problems and end with resolutions. It's unlikely Covid is going to permit this. We are going to live with its reality for a lifetime, with all the anxiety and uncertainty this affords. The greatest of scientists, Albert Einstein once said: 'in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity'. Beyond today lies a chance to re-shape our common life and the value of other people's bodies. But in the midst of the crisis, the opportunity that falls to us so clearly today is to say thank you. You stepped up to the front line and you kept on stepping up.

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