

Flick through the channels on your TV on any evening, search the guide any day, and you'll be provided with a wealth of choice, programmes ranging from property to cooking to reruns of old shows. But standing out amongst all the soaps and the dramas are the countless programmes that centre, either as fiction or as a window into reality, on what happens in hospitals, what happens in an ambulance, what happens to doctors, what happens to nurses.

And it's not a new phenomenon. Those of you my age will remember 'Dr Finlay's Casebook' and 'Emergency Ward 10' on the television and of course the much more glamorous 'Dr Kildare'. The drama of the hospital is the drama of our lives. We all fear illness, for ourselves, for our loved ones, in our family, and we seek constant reassurance that the people we will meet in hospitals will know what they're doing, that it'll all be alright in the end, whatever happens to us.

Between 1975 and 1983 there was a very popular drama series on the BBC called 'Angels' which focused in on nurses themselves and the title itself reflected the feeling that people, in general, have towards nurses, that you, those of you who are or have been in the nursing profession are angels, sent at the time of our greatest need, sent to minister to us, as angels do in the scriptures as we've heard in this service, navigating the space between earth and heaven, bringing us messages of hope, good news. We all know that whilst in one sense everyone of you is an angel, in fact you're not, no more than I'm a saint. We're all human beings called in some way or another, by God, by instinct, by inclination, to do something on behalf of others that's extraordinary.

This Guild of Nurses is about the profession 'past, present and future'. That is the context for so much of what Christians believe, that like the angels, like God, we stretch across time, into the past, living in the present, looking to the future. There have always been nurses, there are nurses and, pray God, whatever robots can in the future be made to do, we hope there always will be nurses – I for one don't want to be given a bed bath by an updated version of an R2D2 or a CP30!

But whoever we are, the present is not a comfortable place to be, not an easy part of that continuum of history of which nurses, like priests, are part.

Like many of you, like many of the people in London, I've been deeply affected by the events of the first half of this year, on Westminster Bridge, close to St Thomas' Hospital and on London Bridge and in the Borough Market, close to Guy's Hospital, surrounding Southwark Cathedral where I'm Dean.

At Southwark Cathedral we were privileged to host the funeral service for PC Keith Palmer, killed doing his job at the Palace of Westminster and I had the responsibility of preaching the sermon at the funeral. It gave me the opportunity to think about what it might be like when we don't run away from danger, don't follow our natural, first instincts, but walk towards the danger, approach the attacker, to risk all for the sake of the other person, of the greater good, to put ourselves in the dangerous, rather than the safe place.

And then the horror of June 3<sup>rd</sup> struck our community. As soon as I heard something was happening I headed from my house, dog collar on, with my keys, to open the Cathedral as a place of refuge, as it has been a place of sanctuary in our community for the last 1400 years. But the police turned me back and I ended up on Southwark Street, a street full of ambulances and paramedics tending the injured on the pavements. I have to tell you I was more frightened than I've ever been.

What I didn't know then was that an Australian nurse, Kirsty Boden, who was a member of the team in the Recovery Unit at Guy's Hospital, was one of the 8 people killed that evening, killed right outside the Cathedral, killed wanting to do what she knew how to do, be a nurse, be a nurse of excellence, wanting to help those around her in the midst of this terror attack. When she saw what was happening she headed up the steps by the Cathedral to help those who'd been attacked, only to be attacked and then killed herself.

When Florence Nightingale headed off to the Crimea with her lamp she was heading into one of the most dangerous places. Disease was rife, equipment was lacking; as I understand it, no one knew how to nurse in those circumstances – except she believed she did. Her care for the injured and the dying is the stuff of national legend

and she's part of our national pride. She was no saint but she was an angel, like us, complex individuals trying to do the right thing wherever we might be.

But she did what both Keith and Kirsty did in this city, putting themselves in the place of danger because they believed that their vocations, protecting our society, protecting our democracy, caring for the vulnerable, healing those who are sick, was their first priority and had become their first instinct – not themselves, but their neighbour.

Florence Nightingale said many things when reflecting back on her life as a nurse but one of the things that she did say was this

'I never gave or took any excuse.'

When I read that I found it quite a challenge. I give countless excuses as to why I haven't done this that or the other, why I can't achieve this target or that, why there are not more people in my church, why the giving isn't better than it is, why we haven't achieved all we set out to achieve. Believe me I'm good at excuses, and it often appears to be the fault of everyone else except me, if you listen to me.

Florence Nightingale is saying to me that there's no room for the excuse, the one I make, the ones I hear from others, in stopping me doing the right thing. And if that challenges me, I hope it challenges you. As a nation we've descended into a blame culture – it's the fault of austerity, it's the fault of Brexit, it's the fault of politicians, it's the fault of administrators, it's the fault of the patients. I think that in her own terms Florence Nightingale faced all the equivalents but she took that lamp and walked among the men and brought them the care and the love that they needed at that moment and she brought back her insights to help make your profession a real profession and nursing one of the high callings in our society. And she demanded excellence from her nurses as she demanded it from herself and 'never gave or took any excuse.'

The care of the sick and the most vulnerable is not the preserve of the church or of the faith communities. But as a Christian what I believe my faith does is to raise my sights from simply my own needs to recognise the needs of my sisters and brothers and especially when they're at their most vulnerable and to seek to be in some way that angel that others see you as being.

Jesus told the crowds a story about how he saw the world, the world at its best, the kingdom as we call it and the punch line was, 'As much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters' and by that he meant the sick, the naked, the homeless, the prisoner – 'you did it to me.'

This Guild is so important because nurses and your profession need the encouragement and the support that you can give, and that sense of rightful status in this City alongside all the other Guilds. You are angels in the eyes of many of us, heroes and friends to whom we look at our most difficult moments, when we want you to make us better, when we want you to make the person we love, better.

You have to break to us the hardest news with the gentlest words. You have to hold us and wipe us and bind up our wounds. We shout at you when we're angry, and scream at you when we're in pain, we weep when it's gone wrong and blame you when it doesn't go as we think it should – and you remain there for us. Like angels you help us in that place between heaven and earth and sometimes must guide our path from one to the other. I cannot thank you enough and thank God for you.

Andrew Nunn  
Dean of Southwark