70 Years of the NHS

Yesterday the National Health Service celebrated its seventieth birthday. A number of events were held, not least a service in York Minster.

The NHS was launched on 5th July 1948 by the then Health Secretary, Aneurin Bevan, at Park Hospital in Manchester (known today as Trafford General Hospital).It was based on 3 core principles that remain as relevant today:

- that it meet the needs of everyone;
- that it be free at the point of delivery;
- that it be based on clinical need, not ability to pay.

For the first time hospitals, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, opticians and dentists were brought together under one umbrella to provide these free services.

Of course a lot has changed in the last seventy years, much for the better. However, despite the dedication of its staff the NHS has been under pressure for some time and that is likely to continue. The NHS is a great asset that we should treasure and protect at all costs. I imagine all of us have benefitted from its care and services at some time or other, and are extremely grateful for that.

Our Bible reading just now (Sirach 38.1-14) may not be very well know but is surely a timely reminder. For physicians, though, we should also include nurses and all health professionals, and indeed all who work in a supportive capacity.

Our passage reminds us that healing comes ultimately from God. He is the source of the skill and knowledge that are applied to relieve pain and the effects of illness. Doctors and nurses who are Christians would surely agree with that. Which is why the work of hospital chaplains is also so important.

Medical staff in this country are under great pressure. Even more so are those who work in the war-torn parts of our world, where physical injuries are on a terrible scale and on a daily basis. And so we are grateful both to those who are based permanently in those countries as well as charities such as Médecins sans Frontières.

But why should we be thinking about the NHS during this time of prayer for peace and reconciliation? I am sure we would all agree that healthcare is a basic human right, and something to which everyone should have access. Not only that but healthcare is one important prerequisite of a stable and peaceable country. Health provision and peace belong together. Which is why the bombing of hospitals is regarded as such an indefensible atrocity. And so we give thanks for the NHS and for all who devote their lives to the care of others, wherever they may be.

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