

Anne Doerr, Royal Marsden Hospital. 18th October 2020

Waiting patiently; this phrase captures some of the quiet and often unseen ministry of a Hospital Chaplain. Sometimes people ask me what exactly a chaplain does, and indeed there are many tasks to perform, and I could give a long list of them. But at the very heart of the ministry is patient waiting:

Waiting with an anxious person in outpatients to be called by the doctor to receive scan results.

Waiting at a bedside for doctors to come and deliver news. Sometime that news will be a source of hope and rejoicing, and sometimes a source of lament.

Watching and *waiting* at the bedside of a dying patient.

In the relatives room with a family *reaching out for hope* and comfort where all hope has been dashed.

Being there for staff who are upset, for all professionals are profoundly touched by those they care for.

Chaplaincy is a ministry of patient waiting, a ministry of being.

All of us here today will all be asked questions about our faith, and my Chaplain colleagues and I are asked more than our fair share.

Will God work a miracle for my brother? Will this treatment cure my disease? Where is God in this situation? Why do children get cancer? These are hard questions with no easy answers. Be assured that cancer in childhood is rare but as a Chaplain on the Sutton site where we have the children and young people's Unit we have many children and young people coming from all parts of the Southeast to us for treatment.

Last year filming took place on the ward for the recent Channel 4 programme *Can We Cure Kids' Cancer?* Which followed the stories of 3 children and their families. There was a moment towards the end when it was impossible not to feel overwhelmed by grief. Three-year-old girl was reacting badly to chemo, and transferred to from RMH Sutton to intensive care at St Georges, but seemed to be enjoying a game of snap with the nurse and this was the final time we saw her. "Sadly, it's a table for one less these days," her dad explained from his kitchen at home as he prepared dinner for his family.

What do you say when there are no words? What do you do when there is nothing which will bring comfort? Where is the Christian hope in this situation?

The role of a Chaplain is more about *being* than doing, it's a ministry of presence. Patients will often say that other health care professionals will come with an agenda, but Chaplains just come to be with the person. That maybe to listen, to pray and to help with spiritual distress.

I often describe myself as someone who will sit with the people with their questions, a companion on the journey as Jesus was with the two disciples on the Emmaus Road.

I might read part of Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up:
You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways...

or tell, in my own words the parable of the lost son, from Luke's gospel, for God is the one who seeks us out and finds us, even when we feel trapped and alone in the depths of despairGod does not stand by and wait for us to emerge, but comes looking.

And so today we thank God for St. Luke whose gospel has very many unique and beautiful features that teach us about God and Christ. The canticles that may be familiar to many of us: The Benedictus (the Song of Zechariah), the Nunc Dimittis (the Song of Simeon) and the Magnificat (the Song of Mary) are unique to Luke. These are all songs of deep joy at the loving purposes of God made known in Christ. Luke's is truly the gospel of joy. The very last verse of the gospel is this: 'And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.'

In our second lesson this morning, we learn two important things about St. Luke: he was a companion of Paul and he was a physician. Care for the sick has always been part of Christian faith and practice. Jesus' healing ministry and his concern for the sick are integral to all the gospels, not least Luke's. The power of God in Jesus searches for and finds those lost in the depth of sickness and despair. Those who are overwhelmed by their situation need to hear the hope that the narrative of illness is not the story of their life. Chaplaincy looks beyond the patient to the person, and gives the space to hear stories and explore soul searching questions. Many feel that sickness is a punishment, or that something in their life has put them beyond the reach and love of God. Many have just lost the connection with church and faith and just don't know how to reconnect when they desperately want to.

Being able to speak of a love that seeks you out and will not let you go is such a privilege. It is very moving to do so when maybe no one has spoken with a person of the love of God before.

Chaplains are an important part of multidisciplinary team working, and the beautiful passage from Ecclesiasticus this morning speak powerfully of this: 'My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you...Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him.' So we have the medical professionals skills blended with attentive prayer, all with a single purpose: to help those in those in pain, in darkness, in fear. We need the patient attentiveness of prayer supporting the skill of professionals in hospitals, care homes, hospices and the community. The care of the sick and the lost and those on the margins and a life rooted in prayer is how the Gospel writer Luke describes the mission and ministry of Christ.

On Friday I spent time with a family who were in deep distress, and said they weren't religious. As our conversation was drawing to a close I gently asked if they would like me to pray and I prayed a simple prayer, offering their situation and future hope to God. Thank you for reaching out to us they said.

It is God who reaches out and I am often just the right person in the right place at the right time.

A few weeks ago I was visiting Clare, a woman of great faith who I had got to know quite well. She was under the care of the Palliative care team, who all knew how important her faith was to her, and she used to tell them she was in 'God's waiting room'. One day Angela, the Consultant and I turned up at the same time as me and Angela said to me 'I was just popping by to see how she is but you go in. I'll come back later. Anne, you can do so much more for Clare now than we can'. I was very moved by what she said, and when I took dear Clare's funeral, I talked about Clare's faithful witness right to the end of her life. God waste's nothing, and time and time again staff are inspired and moved by the faith of those who they care for.

As we celebrate St Luke today, it is again an opportunity to give thanks for our NHS on this most difficult of years, for the care and compassion of staff who are exhausted working long shifts in uncomfortable PPE. We cannot see an end to this pandemic, and as hospital chaplains we have been supporting staff as much as patients and their families..... and so in our lives too, when we are worn down and confused by this crisis let us always remember the words in the letter of Peter: 'Cast all your anxiety on to him for he cares for you'.

I like many others have found myself at times in recent months feeling I have nothing more to give, and yet I know, too, that the burdens of others are not mine to carry.. that I can lay them at the foot of the Cross, and that it is in Christ that my renewed strength can be found.

This morning, as we give thanks for St Luke, may we too following his example of serving others, by caring for one another and using our God given opportunities to share the hope we have of the Christ's kingdom here on earth, and the kingdom yet to come.

Amen