

Come to Me

Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The National Health Service began on 5 July 1948. The NHS, which Aneurin Bevan described as “a great and novel undertaking”, is the stuff of history. Few people now working in it had been born when it began. Over the past 75 years the NHS has weathered countless changes in policy, controversies and crises of all kinds – including the serious challenge of the COVID pandemic – during which time it has come to occupy a unique position in national culture and identity. It is more popular than any other British institution, and for the great majority of those now living the NHS has been a constant presence through our lives. It has assisted in births, nursed through ill health, and tended people at their time of dying.

It has its faults and failings like any institution, and we all know of times when things have gone wrong or unnoticed. The NHS is filled with people like us, and it is bound to reflect our weaknesses as well as our strengths. For times when I can think of things that went wrong, I can think of many more where women and men have gone far and beyond the call of duty. Some of you will have worked in the NHS, or who have family who work there, and you know of the joys and horror, the long hours and lack of recognition, the constant struggle to call every decision correctly, and the weariness of long shifts and consistent under-resourcing.

The NHS grew out of Sir William Beveridge’s 1942 report that reimagined the role of the state in a post-war nation, setting out to combat the five ‘great evils’ of society: want, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness. Beveridge wrote, “A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.” It was a bold and distant vision for a better future. It has a Jesus-flavour.

Aneurin Bevan who did so much to shape the NHS after the Second World War made clear that it must “universalise the best”, not simply provide a safety net for the poorest. It must be, ‘free at the point of delivery’; patients were not to pay at the time of treatment, and it must be provided according to need, not the ability to pay. It was the first universal health system to be available to all and financed from taxation. It was also, Bevan admitted, “the biggest single experiment in social service that the world has ever seen.” I suspect every single one of us here has cause to be grateful for it at some point or other in our lives, and grateful to the ordinary and extraordinary women and men who make it happen.

Whether people come from a faith tradition or not, it is hard to escape the fact that the centuries-old Christian culture of our country has seeped into the DNA of many of our institutions. With the NHS it is not much of a stretch to see that in the compassion and the care, and also in the healing, that there are strong undertones of a Christian ethic and practice. When Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”, it is hard not to hear part of that essential message deeply embedded in the NHS.

This passage in the Bible, cherished because of the Great Invitation it offers to the overburdened, and the tired, and the sick, speaks powerfully. It speaks powerfully because it is not only the gift of Jesus to help those in need; there is also the responsibility that we have, tired though we may be, to engage with Jesus in this healing and helping process. Isn't it curious that when Jesus offers rest, He also offers a yoke. The image conjures up oxen bound for work, whilst the other invites the reader into a state of peace and healing for body, mind, and soul. Might it be possible that we are invited to realise that when we find rest, healing, comfort, peace, we are called to offer these things to others who are in need?

All through the New Testament we find people encountering Jesus, who then go on to tell others so that others may benefit from His presence too. When Jesus says, "Come to Me", are we ready to respond? Are we willing to accept the rest, healing, comfort, and peace He offers? Or do we resist? When a doctor prescribes a course of treatment or action, or lifestyle change, do we go along with it, or do we resist and refuse, and then have to live with the consequences? What happens if we choose not to come to Jesus, and resist His offers? What do you think the consequences might be of you?

We don't see many yokes around these days. Indeed, we may forget that a yoke, a wooden bar or frame that joins two animals together so they can pull a heavy load, is not only something that is meant for two, but something that was used by farmers to train inexperienced animals for their work. Less experienced beasts would be teamed with more experienced ones so that the new beast could learn how to pull the weight of a plough with the more experienced one.

Jesus knows our yoke, He knows the burden, whether we carry it in our body, mind or soul. Through Him, do you think what He is saying is that we learn to do our work, bear our burden, when we work with Him, and with others, who will help shoulder the load? Might it be that through our faith, partnered with Jesus and taught how to balance and manoeuvre the load, we might learn how to cope, and to move on?

I wonder if the lesson of the yoke is learning how to get in sync with Jesus, Whose presence balances the weight of our pressures. Through loving kindness and gentleness, carrying the yoke of Jesus, we learn to navigate all the other challenges in our lives, whatever they might be.¹ Seen in this light, and I know it is not always easy and is certainly not glib, can we see that some of our burdens are not meant to crush us but to make us stronger. Perhaps we gain a new appreciation of the blessings we have. Perhaps we realise that in life, there are often people there to help and

support, and we have been too stubborn, or proud, to ask for help. Perhaps we understand that in many situations, we're not the first people to go through a bereavement, or cancer, or failing eyesight, or divorce, and that it might be that there are people, or services, or groups, or faith, to help us in the rougher times. That requires a significant attitude change on our part, particularly when we don't want to be a burden, or be beholden to anyone. We don't like to ask for help, even when we know we need it. We don't like to admit we aren't coping, even when the evidence is all around us.

I'm not counselling moving too quickly to the pastoral assurance of what Jesus is offering here. Jesus is more often present in times of need than in times of plenty, in times of pain than in times of well-being. Which is why the two-part offer He makes needs to be *seen* as two parts. Rest will come, there will be an easing, we will have time to draw our breath, get sorted out, take time off for a season, but it is tied in to not only being willing to come to Jesus for help, but also to work with Jesus to help yourself, and to help others.

Jesus is not offering total freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labour. Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of all work, but rather of work to which we are ill suited, of work extracted under compulsion and motivated by fear, or of work performed in the face of futility. There is also the weariness that comes from having nothing at all.

By contrast Jesus' yoke means having something to do: a purpose that demands your all and summons forth your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see the reality of God's love at work in our world today, in which we, alongside others, and alongside Jesus, have a part to play.ⁱⁱ

Are you one of the weary and heavy-laden? Are you suffering under a burden that is unjust or unequal, or do you see others in that plight? We look around and see those living in relative or

real poverty. People for whom life is a daily struggle on the margins of life and death. People who are marginalised and disregarded because someone, somewhere, has told them or shown them that they don't matter, rendering them silent or powerless. Passed by or ignored because they're too old, too young, not the right gender, not the right colour, not the right background. Perhaps we have grown weary or downhearted trying to speak up and speak out for people like these, and wondering if we'll ever make a change in society.

To them, and to us, Jesus says, "Come to Me." Not for complete rest, not for endless holiday (how boring that would be), but to find that our ease will often come when we engage in a cause that is necessary, and can be well done, and will make a difference, when we work with others, not shouldering the whole burden on our own, and finding that there is help at hand.

When what we are going through seems beyond our ability to carry, that is exactly the time when faith in Jesus is calling us to surrender our way and trust to Him. Perhaps our burdens seem too much for us because we were never meant to carry them alone. Perhaps it is time, again or for the first time, to listen to what He has to say, to accept, follow, and do.

"Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy (or kindly), and my burden is light."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Shelley D Best, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1 p301

ⁱⁱ Lance Pape, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p217