Annual Florence Nightingale Commemorative Service
St Margaret’s Church, East Wellow, 10 May 2015

Florence Nightingale sermon

By Debbie Thrower

Gospel reading: John 4:31-38

What was Florence Nightingale really like? It sounds as if she had something of a love - hate relationship with the Church of England! Just listen to her fulminating, impatiently and rather magnificently, when she says: ‘All that the Church of England offers me is fiddling, faddling and the endless tweedling of nosegays in jugs.’ (I don’t think she was content with just being on the flower-arranging rota, do you?)

Magnificent too in the way she could bring British Rail to a halt - just like that! There’s the story of when she was on a train journey and lost her white Persian kitten. The cat, called Quiz, had been travelling on her mistress’ lap until, suddenly, she jumped out of the window at Watford.

Not only was the train stopped while a search was mounted... but all down the line locomotives put on the brakes, as the message came through that a pet feline of Florence Nightingale’s no less, was on the loose! ‘I summoned all the station masters in England to my assistance,’ she said.

You’ll be glad to hear, Quiz was found, and spent the night in the parcels office at Euston, to be returned the next day shocked, but ‘alive and singing’.

Magnificent too (positively awe inspiring)... in the way she set about pursuing her many causes... once she had broken through the boundaries which - in her day - hemmed in the life of traditional, middle-class English ladies: causes such as the plight of British soldiers fighting in the Crimea, of course, as well as less-publicised work spearheading drainage improvements in numerous towns and villages in the Indian subcontinent.

Her impatience, coupled with energetic vision, proved an unbeatable combination. As well as being dubbed ‘The Lady of the Lamp’, an art critic of the day saw Florence as a ‘St Joan of Sanitation’.
I think ‘impatient’ might also describe Jesus, the day he met the Samaritan woman at the well. Breaking a taboo by talking with her, he was able to see what others couldn’t, later realising that the conversation he’d just had with this Gentile woman signalled a wider appetite to hear his kingdom message, one that went way beyond the Jewish people alone.

He could see the time was ripe - for a harvest of men and women. He was impatient to get on with the job, just like the time he’d called his disciples by the Sea of Galilee and promised they’d be ‘fishers of men’.

Florence found conventional mores stultifying. No wonder she let off steam about the Church of England: to her, so slow to allow women the chance to exercise their vocations, so slow to appreciate the changes taking place... as increased urbanisation represented both a challenge and a mission opportunity.

It wasn’t until Florence was in her 30s she was able to follow her calling into nursing. Before then, she was prone to a sort of spiritual loneliness, which showed itself in self-doubt and depression. At every turn, she felt thwarted in her desire to (in her words) ‘accomplish something’.

Her impatience surfaces in an essay of 1873, musing on how little attention is paid to God beyond the Sunday service:

To Christ, God was everything - to us he seems nothing... or if he is anything he is only the God of Sundays, and only the God of Sundays as far as going to what we call our prayers, not the God of our weekdays, our business, and our play, our politics, and our science, our home life and our social life.

There’s something about these glimpses of the private dissatisfaction of Florence Nightingale that reminds me of the mental anguish of Mother Teresa, whose own spiritual desolation (which lasted years) only became apparent after her death (and from her private journals and correspondence). Mother Teresa plodded on with her work, in obedience to a vision of how the poor could be helped, and comfort brought to the diseased and dying.

Just as Mother Teresa could see Christ in the face of a destitute beggar so Florence, faced with the agonising pain of a soldier lying in unsanitary conditions, was determined to put right all that lay within her power.

Writing on her return from the Crimean War, she emphasised how spiritual ideals must be embodied (incarnated) in everyday living. There will be no heaven unless we make it ourselves, she said: ‘the kingdom of heaven is within, indeed, but we must also create one without, because we are intended to act upon our circumstances.’
And act, she did - indefatigable not only in her nursing, but her administrative work, report writing and endless correspondence even from her sickbed. Prolonged ill health took its toll, but still she worked on.

There’s one particular quotation of Florence Nightingale’s that I came upon some time ago which really struck a chord, especially as I head up a new initiative for the charity, The Bible Reading Fellowship, called The Gift of Years which aims to resource the spiritual journey of older people: ‘The needs of the spirit are as critical to health as those of the individual organs which make up the body.’ Was the founder of modern nursing ahead of her time defining such a holistic approach - with as much weight given to the spiritual health of an individual as we might place on someone’s physiological and psychological state?

My curiosity was piqued since finding myself (after several decades as a broadcaster) working as a Chaplain to Older People. It’s a community chaplaincy, which originated in Alton in Hampshire but is now spreading, and one that’s dedicated to promoting the spiritual welfare of people in their later years.

I like to think that Florence, with her many references to ‘sympathy’ (and her dismay when that sympathy was distinctly lacking), might have approved?

Perhaps she’d have recognised a challenge in its quest to awaken the wider church to the demographic changes taking place. We live in a rapidly ageing society: double the number of over-85s in 20 years’ time, nearly treble the number in another 30 years (Age UK). I wonder, were she still alive, whether she’d also want to see the spiritual needs of older men and women taken much more fully into account.

Successive losses, grief, long-term spiritual blockages such as an inability to forgive... all have a bearing on a person’s well-being. I surmise that had I been asked to call on the elderly Miss Nightingale, as she approached her 90th birthday, she might have found it enjoyable talking to someone about her faith, recalling (with a sympathetic listener) some of the high points of her career, able to give free rein to those sorts of memories on which we draw more and more... in the later stages of life. These are spiritually fertile years, ripe years.

She might have welcomed being offered the sacraments in a short service of Home Communion when disability prevented her coming to a church like this in person. I, certainly, think she’d have welcomed the priority placed by today’s church on mission, the need for our prayer lives to lead on to confident social action (or, at least, support of it).

Just as Jesus saw the harvest field ripe, but the labourers few, so Florence declared that ‘Mankind must make heaven before we can “go to heaven” (in this world or any other).’
The church militant was a very real concept for Florence: ‘if any can justly be called an expeditionary force,’ she said, ‘it is surely the expedition of mankind sent by God to conquer earth... to create heaven.’

Before the Samaritan woman made her journey to the well, in the stifling midday heat (no doubt to avoid the dirty looks of her neighbours), it was just another day. By later that afternoon, her life had been changed, by Jesus. The attention he paid her, his eagerness to engage in discussion with her, had transformed her view of the world and her place in it. Now she was becoming the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. A little bit of heaven was in the making...

Florence once wrote: Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by his sympathy to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity. The Age... must give them the means to exercise this moral activity.

Jesus had glimpsed in this one Samaritan woman the extent of possibilities ahead. One can sense his restlessness to get on with the job of bringing in the harvest, of delivering that great commission, to go and ‘make disciples of all nations’.

Florence was, without doubt, a visionary, an activist (sometimes a difficult woman to be around, I’m sure), but we owe her a tremendous debt of gratitude. It matters to keep her memory alive, just as she felt it really mattered to pursue a host of causes. ‘The world is what we have to mould not fly from,’ she said. She held aloft a lamp, a torch, to help lighten a world crying out for truth and transformation.

Florence was never more magnificent than when she uttered among the first words ever to be captured in a sound recording - words so characteristic of her! I pray we might take her challenge to heart - this commemoration day for both Florence and of VE Day of course. ‘I hope my voice,’ she said, ‘may perpetuate the great work of my life.’

She was never more impatient, and rightly so, than when she urged: ‘Let us set ourselves with all vigour to the life, the work... of the present.’ Amen.

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