

us as grown-ups (or people who might quite like to be grown-ups one day), the image of the hope of God's forgiveness is expressed in its most shocking vividness in that lonely figure stubbornly holding the door open, revoking no dispositions made in our favour. Powerless to enforce love or justice, and yet indestructibly, even extravagantly, offering the only kind of love that is appropriate to the extravagant and excessive nature of human beings. An utterly unreasonable compassion, which, because of its utter unreasonableness, can change everything.

An address given on 7 February 2012 at the Wreath-laying Ceremony in Westminster Abbey, marking the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens.

Florence Nightingale

1820–1910

The light of life

Florence Nightingale may very aptly be described as a luminary: somebody who literally brought light into dark places. But she was somebody who was also able to name with precision, with illuminating exactitude, the need and the suffering that was there before her, who was able to see what others couldn't see or refused to see; somebody who, in lifting her eyes to eternal love, at the same time focused her eyes on earthly suffering. It's quite a balancing act, and the extraordinary character of Florence Nightingale lies very much in the way she held that balance.

She reminds us all – as she reminded Victorian society – that love needs clear sight, that it isn't enough to say the right things, to make general sympathetic noises. Love, if it is going to make a difference, has to be precise. And that is why the nursing training, the professional tradition that derives from her, is not simply a training in nursing skills but also a training in seeing clearly. A trained nurse, in Florence Nightingale's vision, was somebody who could see, who was educated to see the

particular, not to gloss it over, not to make it easy, but to see it as God sees the numberless stars – each face unique, each name special – and out of that to see what the needs are that love must serve.

It's often said that it's very easy to love humanity – the problem is human beings. And to love with clarity means, of course, to love human beings in their particularity and to cast light on individuals, the particular needs of this person, this patient; not to generalize but to attend, to look. Lift your eyes to the heavens, because that's the only way of focusing them on earth. Lift your eyes to endless, exact, intelligent love, the love that sustains everything – and something of that intelligent love will spill over into your own care, into your own devotion and attention.

But, of course, that is as much as to say that caring changes us. Caring is not simply something we do: put on, put off, switch on, switch off. It changes us as people. And one of the hardest challenges for those in the 'caring' professions is to know how to cope with that in ways that are not invasive and crippling or crushing; to let the reality of what is there change them and not to let it devour them.

So caring is about clear vision, realism, the clear sight of what's there, the refusal to turn away from the

particular to the general; and because of that it's also about being changed in the encounter, having your heart and your mind stretched, growing up in and through the business of caring, in and through the encounter with suffering. All of this is part of Florence Nightingale's legacy. She was certainly changed by her encounter with suffering; she was a person who was in many ways a good example of the cost that comes with honest engagement.

She was in many ways a phenomenally difficult woman – obstinate, self-righteous, generous, sacrificial, angular, judgemental and compassionate all at once, so much changed by the encounter with suffering that her life showed cost, damage even. The risks were real, and they still are. And yet in allowing herself to be changed, to be in some ways almost moulded out of shape by the suffering she encountered, she made a difference that no one else could have made.

We can't any of us plan to be obnoxious, angular and difficult – mostly we just are by nature. We can't plan to be difficult and unique saints. We manage normally to be rather average sinners. But we can look at someone like Florence Nightingale and think of the cost of attention. What did it cost her to see clearly, exactly, to see the specifics? How did it change her? Only because

it changed *her* did it change the face of nursing care in Britain and far more widely. It may give us, of course, a little bit of patience with ourselves and one another, recognizing that sometimes things are only changed when they become more, not less, difficult. But, above all, she ought to remind us that it is quite simply possible, if your eyes are fixed on an uncompromising love, to see more clearly and then to love more exactly; possible to be changed, and changed in such a way that everything is changed around you.

We speak often of the saints as burning and shining lights in their generation. And, as we all know, that is an image very much at the heart of the mythology of 'the Lady with the Lamp'. But for all of us who seek to follow the calling of care, something of the same applies. We are all called to enlighten, to provide a perspective that will allow things to be seen clearly; we are all called to give that focused, specific attention that begins to give light to those most deeply in darkness because they feel they've been forgotten and never attended to.

We talk perhaps less often than we used to about nursing as a vocation. And that's a pity, because a calling of any kind is a calling to be changed – it is not just a calling to do a job but a calling to grow into a certain kind of humanity. And generations upon generations

of nurses responded to that call because – as much as anything – they wanted to be a certain kind of human being.

I hope that the nursing profession continues to be something that calls people who want to be a certain kind of human being, not just to do a job, not just to write things on lists, not just to contribute to some analysis of productivity and efficiency, but to be a particular kind of person, to be someone who sees with precision, who attends to the particular, and, in all of that, who risks being changed; not just caring from outside but being alongside; negotiating the great difficulties that brings; keeping your own space, your own integrity and your own freedom, yet at the same time being generously open. No one pretends that that is easy. But when it happens, when people do grow into that kind of humanity, things change. Light shines in dark places, other people's eyes are lifted and they discover something of that extraordinary promise in the book of Isaiah: 'They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not grow weary' (Isaiah 40.31).

Florence Nightingale, like many other reformers, ran fast and furiously to achieve her ends, and she didn't always mind very much whom she elbowed out of the

Florence Nightingale

way in the process either. But, with that eagle eye of hers, she saw what needed to be done and she did it; she saw because she was changed by the love to which day after day she lifted her eyes.

A sermon preached on 15 May 2010 in the chapel of St Thomas' Hospital, marking the 100th anniversary of the death of Florence Nightingale.

Sergei Bulgakov

1871–1944

Politics, art and prayer

For most of continental Europe, the twentieth century was a nightmare era. Those of us who have grown up in other parts of the world probably still don't quite understand what the corporate trauma of twentieth-century Europe meant to so many. Millions of people in Europe lived through the end of their world; millions lived through it not once but twice: in the tearing up of the map of Europe that followed the First World War, and in the massive displacements as well as the unspeakable suffering and slaughter that characterized the Second World War and the years immediately afterwards.

It's a history that makes the beginnings of Christianity somehow more intelligible, closer than we might have thought. Jesus' preaching and the first witness of the early Christians took place in a world where the end of all things was expected. And a great deal of what Jesus taught was about how to live through the end of the world, when all that you consider to be familiar, controllable and reliable disappears. So it is hardly surprising that so many figures of spiritual and intellectual