ARE THE VALUES OF FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

It is wonderful to have the opportunity to join with you today as we celebrate international nurse’s day. Some of us will have been nurses for a long time, some for not so long, and others here today may be celebrating the role or impact that nurses have had in their lives. There is so much that could be said about nurses and nursing, so much to celebrate and rejoice in, even in the midst of trying times. And so often on International Nurses day we look to remarkable men and women who inspire us professionally. Well today’s subject of honour was a strong, intelligent, well read, well travelled, independent woman whose commitment and dedication to health care was unprecedented at the time. She bucked the traditions of her times, remained independent of the usual social networks, lived at times dangerously and bravely sometimes at great personal risk, she took on the establishment, became the champion of the poor and ill, had the ear of queens and government, was focussed and difficult and obstinately committed to her cause. She was care giver, teacher, advocate, social reformer, statistician, philosopher and activist. A great friend but I would think a formidable foe. She was of course Florence Nightingale known as the patriarch of professional nursing, but who in fact achieved so much more that that as well. And of course IND is celebrated on her Birthday – May 12th.

She was a true rebel with a cause at a time when it was completely unacceptable for her to be so. So what drove her? What motivated her to take on her parents, her peers and the establishment? Well fortunately Florence was an articulate rebel and a prolific writer of personal letters, essays and research papers, so we can gain a fairly good idea of what motivated her.

Florence was driven fore mostly by her worldview as are we all. Florence’s world view stemmed primarily from her belief in a creator God who made all
things, including us and her resultant understanding of how that God works in
the world and wants us to relate to the world he has made.

Florence’s understanding of God was not just a reflection of the world in which
she lived or the time in which she was born. Florence was widely read and
widely travelled. She was educated in maths, economics, astronomy, science,
multiple languages, history and philosophy. Hers was not a blind faith but an
informed faith. She had a lot of time to review her beliefs and test them
against other philosophies. She wrote much about her call from God to a
mission or calling, not knowing initially what that would be. She waited 7
years to understand that her calling was to nursing and another 7 years before
any work actually began. She was studied and learned and from these she
came to understand certain truths that would shape the work she became
renowned for.

Firstly then Florence believed that God was a God of laws. He created the
universe and made it to run according to these laws: and ‘we know them well:
the laws of gravity, the laws of seasons, the laws of moons and tides as well
as the laws of science. Following on from this belief was her conviction that
people are expected to use God’s laws for the benefit of others once we have
become aware of them.

‘God governs by his laws but so do we, when we have discovered
them.’

To her, the study of science was almost an obligation for any intelligent
person. To her the study of science and the application of that knowledge to
better people’s lives was a mere extension of her understanding of a God
who created the world and gave people the job of living in it. To discover the
wonder of God’s creation and to work within it is to bring Him glory. In one
essay she wrote
“We are to do careful, quantitative research, using the best methods possible, thereby to know and apply God’s laws. When we do we become God’s co-workers”

She makes the same point in a more sarcastic vein when she wrote

“It did strike me as odd, sometimes, that we prayed to be delivered from plague, pestilence and famine when all the common sewers run into the Thames’

God had given the laws of health and hygiene. It is our job to use those laws to make life better, not to blame God for the results when we ignore them.

Florence is of course most famous for applying these convictions to the battlefield. As I’m sure you are aware it was during the Crimean war in the mid 1850s when she so improved the conditions of wounded soldiers that she returned a national hero. When she returned to England, she extended this knowledge to include civilian as well as military hospitals and of course to the establishment of a trained and professional nursing workforce.

But she applied her knowledge not only to nursing. Following her successes in the Crimean war, during which time she had begun to collect rudimentary data on illness and mortality, she began to use this data to lobby for health care reforms. As someone who was a systems thinker before the term was even invented, she turned her attention to improved housing, provision of clean water, adequate nutrition, safe childbirth and good childcare. All of which of course had an impact on the health system.

She was in fact a brilliant statistician. Her calculations showed that improved sanitary conditions and improved housing had direct correlation to decreased mortality rates. Nightingale invented polar area charts, developed systems for recording sickness and mortality data in military hospitals and was instrumental in the founding of a statistical department in the army. She also developed a Model Hospital Statistical Form for hospitals to collect and
generate consistent data and statistics. She became a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society in 1858 and an honorary member of the American Statistical Association in 1874. Karl Pearson acknowledged Nightingale as a "prophetess" in the development of applied statistics. One commentator has said

"In a time when collecting, editing and presentation of data was not as commonplace as it is today and when prejudices against women were prevalent, Nightingale's accomplishments were truly remarkable.

Florence once said “To understand God’s thoughts, we must study statistics, for these are the measure of his purpose.”

So firstly then God is a creator God who governs by laws, gives us the will and ability to discover those laws, care for each other in the proper application of these laws and in so doing recognise his wonder.

Whilst satisfying the left brain with science and statistics, Florence balanced out her world view with her right brain as well. God is not only a God of science but also a God of compassion and humanity. Florence could have used her love of science and statistics to take her in many directions, but it was to the ill and poor that she chose to apply herself. And again we ask ourselves why?

Herein lays another of her firmly held beliefs. And she took her direction again from her study of the Bible. Florence took great comfort that Jesus himself lists caring for the sick as a service of great worth, and indeed that Jesus so identified with the poor, and hungry and sick that when we care for those in need we are actually caring for Christ himself. Florence refers to the passage that was read to us earlier from Matthew in a letter to nurse Elizabeth Torrence. She wrote ‘When we are nursing the sick we may actually be sure that he (Jesus) says to us “I was sick and you nursed me”. Matthew 25:36
From her studies of ancient history, philosophy and science, Florence rightly came to the realisation that it was the coming of Christ that encouraged this concern for those in need. Whilst admitting that in many ways the ancient Romans were superior to her culture at the time, Florence concluded that they had no concept of being good to the sick and weak. On May 28 1900 she wrote to a group of nurses stating that ‘Kindness to sick man woman and child came with Christ.’

This was demonstrated in Jesus parable of the Good Samaritan where the lowest of the low was now to be helped not ignored. Passages such as Galatians 3:28 which reminds us we are all one in Christ; that promote equality before God regardless of race, nationality, social status or gender. These were radical in Jesus day and changed history. Florence took these teachings to heart and they drove her day to day pursuits. In a letter to William Rathbone as she argues for equal and excellent healthcare for all she states ‘When the poor pauper becomes sick, from that moment he ceases to be a pauper and becomes brother to the best of us’ One of her major projects was to reform the workhouses or public infirmaries of the day which were places of great misery and destitution with little or no real medical or nursing care.

Other passages from Scripture exhorted her to a faith in action. She identified with God calling to Mary and saw herself as Gods handmaiden, or fellow worker with Christ - doing Gods work on earth. She was drawn to people of action and felt strongly that all who follow Jesus should be active in that faith.

However her faith was not works based. Whilst she felt truly called to action and saw herself as fulfilling God call on her life, she also clearly understood that she was totally dependant on God to achieve all that was set before her. Prayer and reflection were part of her daily life, as was getting out into Gods creation to celebrate the wonder and majesty of God. She believed that the life of the spirit should nourish the practical life of service.
She was also very aware that science will only get us so far. She would say that we provide the environment for healing but God does the work. The nurses role was to supply the right conditions. ‘Go to Gods infirmary and rest a while’ was advice she gave. Chemicals don't cure, but God.

There are two Bible passages in particular that Florence most strongly identified with.

The first is from Samuel when God calls to Samuel in the night and he replies ‘Lord here I am’ Florence felt called and was willing to do Gods bidding.

The second is taken from John when Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water. They were terrified and he replied “it is I. don't be afraid.

In an essay published in a theology journal Florence wrote “It strikes me that all truth lies between these two. Man saying to God ‘here am I.’ and God saying to man ‘be not afraid’.

God says to man in misery, in degradation, in anxiety, in imbecility, in loss of the bitterest kind, in sin, most of all in sin ‘lo it is I, be not afraid' This is the eternal passion of God. And Man must say to him ‘Lord here am I to work at all these things’

So what then do we make of all these things today? I doubt that any of us would choose to distance ourselves from the type of activities that Florence was so passionate about: adequate health care, a robust and professional nursing system, rigorous and purposeful research which influences policy and practice, access and equity for all people regardless of position or means, a sense of conscience, a challenging of injustice and inequality, taking the life you have been given and living it to the full.

Florence did all this and we applaud her and benefit from the legacy she established. But I wonder some times if any of us live the examined life that she did. If any of us take the time to measure our own motives and to be as sure as she was to why we do what we do.
In the midst of uncertain times, great opposition, frustration and ignorance, Florence understood her place in the world and how she was to live in it. She was very secure in her understanding of how the world worked (Gods’ creation under his law), how she was then to work in that world, discover the truths of Gods creation, use that knowledge to care for people and provide a better standard of life, promote equality and compassion as reflected in the life of Christ, all the while recognising that she was not the master of her own destiny, but a child of God and dependant upon Him.

I am reminded of a passage from Ephesians when I think of Florence Nightingale.

“Be imitators of God therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”

Florence knew that the greatest model of care for this created world was when the creator God, sent his son to bridge the gap between the mess in the world and His perfect self. Florence was well aware of the mess, she lived in it day by day; a mess bought about by our choosing to turn our back upon God. But she also knew that Jesus death on the cross was God reaching out into that mess to enable things one day to be put right. Starting with each one of us, seeking to reach each person’s heart with his restoring message of hope. So Florence took her call seriously, she chose to be an imitator of God, living a life of love, using her brain and her passion, her focus and determination to reflect the God she knew. And God calls to each one of us if we choose to hear him. He says It is I, don’t be afraid. And our challenge is to respond with her am I Lord and trust him to do the rest.
Presented by Megan McNab, at the 2012 International Nurses Day Service, arranged by NCFA NSW at the Royal North Shore Hospital Chapel St Leonards, NSW Australia.