

WORSHIP IN HOSPITALS

At some point most ministers will be called upon to conduct services in hospitals or residential homes, either as chaplains or participating in a rota of local ministers. This article attempts to set out some guidelines for such worship and concludes with an example of a service used in a hospital setting.

In preparing a hospital service the following principles may be found helpful.

- 1 Participation in hospital worship should be voluntary on the part of patients. Ward Services are a thing of the past, save for exceptional circumstances. The length of time which patients remain in hospital is decreasing, fit patients are frequently allowed home at the week-end and those who are left may be quite ill, especially if the ward has been receiving emergency admissions within the previous day or two. Further the Church gains little by imposing worship upon a captive audience. A chapel or day room is the preferred setting. The exceptional situation might be a long-stay ward where the patients are confined to bed, and where the service would be appreciated by the majority of patients and not unacceptable to the others. A chaplain working in close collaboration with the ward staff would be able to give advice on this matter but there is always the need to be flexible and to tolerate last minute changes in plans.
- 2 The service should be short, not exceeding thirty minutes. This will be quite long enough for most patients who may still be convalescing after surgery, or who may feel that this is long enough to be away from a toilet. In this respect it is important to make patients feel that they are not "trapped" for the whole service but are free to come and go as nature calls. Again prior collaboration with the staff can help convey an acceptance of this degree of informality.

Even within the space of thirty minutes, it is possible to devise an act of worship which is liturgically appropriate with Praise, Prayers of Adoration, Confession and Supplication, the Reading of Scripture, a brief Address and Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession. Prayers should be brief and simple, an attempt being made to express the

thoughts and aspirations of the congregation without encouraging morbid introspection.

- 4 An address will not last more than five minutes and it will be found better to speak simply and directly to the congregation, rather than reading from a prepared manuscript. (This demands more rather than less preparation!) In preparing such an address there are two possible pitfalls. One is that of not taking seriously the situation of the patients, of failing to be aware of their real anxieties, anxieties related to the outcome of tests, or a forthcoming operation or the uncertainty of how long they will be in hospital, or of separation from family. The other danger is exactly the opposite, of focussing too directly upon the situation in which the patients find themselves, of a full frontal attack on carefully maintained defences arousing emotions which are too powerful to handle. One possible resolution of this dilemma is to tell a Biblical story so that the patients hear as much, but no more, than they are ready to hear. Several passages lend themselves to this approach, e.g. the story of the Potter's Wheel (Jeremiah 18, 1-6), Paul's apparently unanswered prayer (II Corinthians 12, 1-10), the Parables of Jesus, and the story of the Stilling of the Storm (Mark 4, 35-41 - see example below). Overall the message should be one of hope emphasising the love and the grace of God. At the end of a service the spirits of the participants should be uplifted rather than depressed!

- 5 The value of sacramental worship should not be underestimated, the visual symbolism of a broken body and shed blood, frequently speaking more powerfully than our normal cerebral Presbyterian approach to worship. Again there are two provisos. In any communion service the invitation should be to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ (and not simply to those who are in good standing with their own church); but remarks should also be made to make participation comfortable for those who wish to share in the spirit of the worship but who do not wish to communicate. They should simply be invited to pass the elements to their neighbours without any sense of embarrassment.

- 6 Finally a word about music. Hymns should be familiar and easily sung. If a group from a local church is available to share in the

worship, so much the better. Where no piano is available or patients are unable to participate fully in the singing, the author has found a pre-recorded tape made by a local church choir to be very helpful. Patients are then free to join in the singing as they are able. (N.B. It is better if the tape is made with piano rather than organ accompaniment).

An Order of Service for Use in Hospital

Hymn 389 The King of Love my Shepherd is

Prayer of Adoration, Confession and Supplication

O God our Father, you were there in the beginning in that first act of creation; you were there bringing order out of chaos, and light out of darkness; therefore we worship and adore you.

You were there in Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection; you were there bringing joy out of sorrow, hope out of despair, yes even life out of death; therefore we worship and adore you.

You have been with your people down through the ages, inspiring men and women to worship you and serve you; you are with us now through your Holy Spirit calling us to find our peace in you; therefore we worship and adore you.

Gracious God, you know us as we are and you know that we are not as we ought to be. Forgive our hasty words, our unkind thoughts, our hidden resentments. Help us to know that in Jesus new beginnings are always possible, that your love never fails, that your grace is freely available to all who put their trust in you.

Be with us in this time of worship; speak to us out of your word that in it we may find the faith and the courage we need, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you O Father and the Holy Spirit we ascribe all glory and praise. Amen.

Hymn 356 My God, how wonderful thou art

Scripture Lesson St Mark, Chapter 4, verses 35-41

Hymn 90 Lead us heavenly Father lead us

Address

We have just heard that story from Mark's Gospel in which Jesus and his disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Can you imagine what happened? Jesus had spent a long day teaching and preaching and at the end of it he was dead beat. They all set off for the other side of the lake and Jesus fell asleep in the boat. As he slept a sudden storm arose, so bad that the disciples felt the boat was sure to capsize. They found themselves in a situation over which they had no control and they were very scared. So in a panic, they woke Jesus up and said "Master, do you not care if we perish?" What a strange question! Of course, he cared, and after spending so long with Jesus, they knew that he cared, but in that moment of panic, they did not feel that he cared. We are told that when Jesus awoke, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea "Peace, be still!" The wind ceased and there was a great calm. I reckon on that particular occasion Jesus calmed more than one storm. Mark tells us that he calmed the storm which raged on the lake. But perhaps more important He calmed the storm which raged in the hearts of the disciples.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of a storm, sometimes events seem to be happening all around us over which we have no control. When that happens we almost always experience a storm raging within us, we become worried and afraid. It is then that we need to hear these words of Jesus, "Peace, be still!"

One final word. Note what Jesus said next. He said "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" He did not say "Why are you so full of doubt? Have you no faith?" For Jesus the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. We are all a strange mixture of faith and doubt, this is what makes us human. Jesus comes to us just as we are, with our faith and our doubts and our fears and speaks the calming word "Peace be still" .

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Let us pray

Let us give thanks to God for his goodness to us

- for happy memories which will last for always
- for families and friends who care for us
- for the doctors and nurses and all the other people who work here
- but above all for Jesus who is with us, calming our fears.

Let us offer to God our prayers for others. O God our Father, your Son Jesus was known as the Prince of Peace. We therefore pray for all statesmen that they may work to bring about peace on earth. We add our prayers to the prayers of all who pray and work for freedom from want, freedom from injustice and freedom from poverty.

O God our Father, your Son Jesus was also known as the Great Physician. Hear us then as we pray for this and every hospital, remembering the doctors and nurses and all other people who make this a place of help and healing. We remember too our fellow patients, those who worry about tests, those who face operations, those who feel they are not getting better quickly enough. You know their needs better than we do; be with them to calm their fears.

We pray for our families. We know that they worry about us. Help them to know we are in your safe hands.

Finally we pray for ourselves. Be with us today and in the coming week. Give us the faith and the courage we need to face whatever life brings. Help us to hear your word "Peace be still" .

These prayers we offer in the name of Jesus who taught us when we pray to say together, Our Father.....

Hymn 211 Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea.

The Benediction.

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