

Dave Short on following Jesus in the workplace

# IMITATING CHRIST IN HEALTHCARE

Instructions are useful, but examples are more effective. Today's healthcare workers very much need good role models. Oh, for another Florence Nightingale, a Thomas Barnardo or a Mother Teresa. Well, where did their inspiration come from? None other than Jesus Christ. I suggest there can be no greater role model for us today.

Jesus is a uniquely appropriate model for healthcare workers because his ministry brought him into contact with a wide spectrum of needy and diseased people. Jesus also had a teaching and training ministry. He had students and we can learn important lessons from how he taught them. Moreover, Jesus is totally original. The Gospels give us a glimpse into his private life. So we can see what made him tick and what kept him going.

Considering Jesus lived 2000 years ago, on the face of it a lot of people might struggle to discern any relevance to current problems in the NHS. But although enormous changes have taken place in the practice of medicine over the centuries, and particularly in the last decades, none of these has displaced the centrality of the medical consultation as a one to one relationship between a person in need and someone with power to help.

Of course healthcare workers do not have the exact same calling as Jesus, the Saviour and Redeemer. Even so, we are part of a team that is in the business of making people whole and this inevitably involves the spiritual dimension. Rightly understood, our healthcare duties can be regarded as a vocation to heal.

Nor do we have the same nature as Jesus. He was divine, and had an insight and authority and power to which we cannot aspire. But even if we view him merely in human terms we would see in him the very best to which we can aspire.

Jesus was uniquely gifted. He was never at a loss for the appropriate word or illustration. Nevertheless, as a man, he was severely and repeatedly tempted to take easy alternatives to his Father's will. We see that in Jesus' relationship with the religious elite of his day. He could be uncomfortable, challenging the established consensus and the accepted ways of doing things. At times he would have been a challenging colleague. But he never fell. Although we are all too fallible, we have Jesus' promise of his Spirit if we ask for this gift.<sup>1</sup> So I believe Jesus is a role model for everyone, whatever his or her calling, a role model who the apostles Peter and Paul exhort Christians to emulate.<sup>2,3</sup>

I suggest, however, that Jesus is especially relevant to healthcare workers, even though it is important to recognise that it is not possible to follow Jesus effectively without first submitting to his authority. He must first be our Saviour and Master before he can be our pattern. Then, when we do follow him, it is not a matter of slavish obedience to a set of rules or an attempt to earn merit, but the impulse of love.

'I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will

of him who sent me.'<sup>4</sup> Everyone's life is dominated, consciously or unconsciously, by some supreme desire, which determines all his or her actions. For a healthcare worker, it may be promotion or respect or reward: good pay without too much hard work or the satisfaction of a job well done. Jesus' supreme desire was to please his Father.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Nothing deflected him from this course. So the night before his crucifixion, Jesus' prayer to his Father, in agony of spirit, was 'My Father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will but as you will.'<sup>8</sup>

This supreme aim determined all Jesus' attitudes and actions. It was because he wanted to do his Father's will that he waited behind in the temple, at the age of twelve, to hear what the rabbis were teaching, while his parents set off for home. When they finally found him, he answered their reproach with, 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'<sup>9</sup> It was because he wanted to do his Father's will that he waited to the age of 30 to start his public work; allowing only three years for a ministry that was to change the world. It was because of his determination to do his Father's will that he never married, in spite of the fact that he regarded marriage as the norm and lived in a society that shared this outlook. He chose, instead, to surround himself with a community that had close, affectionate - yet chaste - relationships with men, women and children.

It was for the same reason that he spent hours in prayer and meditation on God's Word. He made a habit of attending the synagogue services. It was in obedience to his Father's will that he was judicious in his use of time and didn't do everything he might have done. He made the training of his twelve select disciples his priority.

It was to fulfil his Father's will that he followed the Old Testament moral law and legal requirements, such as commanding patients cured of leprosy to report to the priest for confirmation. And yet the uncomfortable Jesus had a strong sense of which laws were central and which were merely human traditions. His willingness to heal on the Sabbath is a powerful example.

So, then, what is our overall aim? As followers of Jesus, can we justify all our actions on the basis of our supreme allegiance to him. For Jesus, obedience to his Father's will involved sacrifice - the supreme sacrifice. And he made it clear that each of his followers, likewise, must be prepared to 'take up his cross'.<sup>10</sup>

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## References

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|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Luke 11:13        | 6. John 5:30      |
| 2. 1 Peter 2:21-23   | 7. John 6:38      |
| 3. Philippians 2:5-8 | 8. Matthew 26:39  |
| 4. John 6:38         | 9. Luke 2:49      |
| 5. John 4:34         | 10. Matthew 16:24 |