

Last weekend we celebrated the 72nd anniversary of the National Health Service. I'm sure like me many of you out there have every good reason to be thankful personally for the NHS. There have certainly been a couple of occasions in my life when my health was restored from a rather perilous position by the care and attention I received from medical staff. Over recent months the NHS has become a particular symbol of our response to the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. We have clapped for carers many who work for this nation in the NHS. There are many people, sadly, who worked for the NHS who have lost their lives in the service of others. This gives a poignancy to this particular anniversary as we say thank you for the NHS but also remember those who have lost their lives.

At heart the National Health Service is about healing people. Healing is a deeply Christian concept, we believe in a God who heals, and the origins of the NHS lie within our nation's Christian heritage, though we share this desire for healing and wholeness with other faiths. At the heart of many acts of Christian worship we express this desire for healing in a particular way when we are given the opportunity to share peace together. Of course, this is something we haven't been able to do for some time and something we will not be able to do in the usual way of a handshake or hug for some time to come.

Nevertheless, sharing the peace together is something we must continue to do spiritually on a regular basis albeit in a socially distanced way for the time being. Because at its heart the sharing of the peace is a declaration that we wish to see health and wholeness throughout ourselves, our nation and the world. For the richness and depth of feeling for a Christian is found in the true shalom of God the word often associated with peace. It's a concept common to Christians Jews and Muslims as well, of course, being present in many other creeds and philosophies.

That said, shalom for the Jewish and Christian tradition has always been about a deep seated sense of God's peace not just bringing an absence of conflict but true health to our lives. So, as we give thanks for the NHS we should be committed to a fresh longing for the shalom of God to descend upon our world. This is whether we use the word shalom or salaam for in that greeting we do not just wish one another well. We do not even just say that we wish to see an absence of conflict. But actually we are expressing a desire for wholeness and wellbeing to fall upon our world and ourselves. Not just a recovery from illness but a commitment to see all the things that are wrong in our society put right. An end to bigotry, injustice and inequality.

At heart the NHS is about a universal care for all - a fantastic idea and a really wonderful thing that our nation rightly celebrates. It is a truly gospel ideal. That universal care should involve the shalom of God prayed for and lived out in our world.

So as we get to share the peace again in person let's commit ourselves to live lives of shalom. This means seeking to make the world a place which knows that in and through the person of Jesus all are called to be recognised and valued. Though a response to the iniquity of discrimination, it has been encouraging to see many people coming together to seek to express common humanity and a desire to overcome prejudice in recent weeks. This is a desire for shalom to prevail.

This, inevitably, should lead Christians to wonder what our part is in praying for shalom, or in Jesus words, seeking that God's reign of justice, mercy and peace be evident. A good starting point is to look to words from scripture seeking that all may know 'the peace of God which passes all understanding' affecting their lives and seeking ourselves to be a blessing to those around us in the name of Jesus the Lord.