



**Homily for the Mass of Thanksgiving on the occasion of the
70th Anniversary of the National Health Service (NHS)**

10th October 2018

All Saints Catholic Church, Ebbw Vale

Archbishop George Stack

I feel a little bit nervous welcoming the people of Tredegar and Ebbw Vale to a Mass of Thanksgiving for the National Health Service. After all, this is your valley, your land, your church and it is from these roots that the prophetic work and voice of Aneurin Bevan gave us the gift of healthcare which is the envy of the world. On the 4th July, I was invited to the National Service at Westminster Abbey in London to give thanks for the 70th anniversary of the NHS. I was also invited to the Wales National Service at Llandaff Cathedral on 5th July. But I wanted to be here with you, where it had its origins, with the Tredegar Medical Aid Society established in 1890 and even before. According to Neil Kinnock, it was “... *the cunning and passion of Aneurin Bevan ... which led to the principles of universal donation during fitness for universal provision during illness*”.

I was recently visiting a patient in one of our hospitals when I was approached by a formidable nurse. She asked me to leave. Not that I was causing disruption but because, as she said, “... *we are delivering care*”. I knew what she meant, and I left quietly, but thought to myself “Isn’t delivering care what you do all the time?”. And of course, it is. The different levels on which that happens is known to us all. The accident and emergency. The ground-breaking surgeries and other medical inventions. The acute wards. The careful nursing back to health and mobility. General Practice. The Outpatients.

Healthcare in the community. The Geriatric and Psychiatric wards. The long lonely farewell of Alzheimers and Dementia. All encapsulated in “delivering care” in this amazing organisation.

You don't need me to tell you of the pressures facing the National Health Service. In some ways it is a victim of its own success. Healthcare has improved beyond all recognition. Life expectancy for women and men has increased also. Expectations of care and cure are higher than ever before, not least because of the way in which we can inform and educate ourselves of our condition. And, of course, the inevitable increasing cost of maintaining a universal healthcare system. I read it in the paper, so it must be true, that in 1997 we spent £97 billion on the Health Service. In 2016 this increased to over £130 billion in 1997 prices. I agree with the general view that most of us would be prepared to pay more tax if it were ring fenced for the NHS. But we could do other things too! Lifestyle issues. The ticking time bomb of diabetes. The epidemic of obesity. The mental health problems caused by lack of identity and purpose and, yes, even poverty.

Dare I quote that well known book “The Satires of Juvenal” (60-130 AD) which speaks of “*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*”? A healthy mind in a healthy body. That surely is what we all

aspire to. It starts with the nurturing and education of our children. Lessons for life do not take place just in the classroom. They are not just to do with physical development and well-being either, no matter what the advertisements tell us. They are not just about PSHE in schools. They are about the emotional, psychological and, yes, spiritual development too. More and more we realise that the delicate balance of body, mind and spirit brings that holistic understanding of ourselves, our relationship with others, as well as our responsibility for the environment. Human ecology is as important as the ecology of the planet on which we live. All these lie at the heart of personal and social integrity. Integrity. This is another word for wholeness. And wholeness is none other than holiness.

I must say a word about chaplaincy – despite data protection issues! Chaplaincy “delivers care” as well. The services offered by chaplains are a reminder that sickness and frailty are a reality in life. They have to be recognised and integrated into the life of every patient, believer and non-believer alike. The faith and religion of a patient are an important part of the healing process on one hand, and on coming to terms with our own reality and mortality on the other. In the Christian community, the Holy Communion and Anointing brought by the chaplain are a reminder to the person who is sick that even though, humanly speaking, we

see sickness as a contradiction and a waste of time, no time is wasted in which God is served. As we heard in the letter of St. James *“The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again”*. A sentence so full of meaning. “Where is God in the midst of human suffering?” we ask. “Here” says Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross.

During this Mass, we give thanks for all those who are “delivering care” through the National Health Service, in every sense of the word. We give thanks for those who have developed that care with skill and knowledge and advancing medical science over the last seventy years. But perhaps most of all, we give thanks for the prophetic words, followed by the heroic actions, of the great son of this valley, Aneurin Bevan. His words ring down the years. *“We are going to Tredegarise you”*. Thank God he did!
