

## Florence Nightingale by Rev Jane Kraft

St Michael's 05 05 24

This morning, we continue our series of sermons, on Heroes of Faith, as we reflect on the life and achievements of Florence Nightingale. Although Florence strived her whole life to improve the lot of women, she preferred the friendship of powerful men, insisting they had done more than women to help her attain her goals.

I am convinced that Florence Nightingale's success in improving the lot and standing of women in society began the move towards the acceptance of the invaluable contribution women can make in all walks of life.

Florence was born on 12 May 1820 in the Italian city of Florence, after which she was named. The second daughter in an upper-class wealthy British family, her father had advanced ideas on the education of women and ensured both Florence and her sister received instruction in history, philosophy, and literature. Florence showed a particular aptitude for mathematics displaying an extraordinary ability for

collecting and analysing data which she would use to great effect in adult life. She was also a gifted linguist and was able to read and write French, German, Italian, Greek, and Latin at an early age.

At the age of 17 Nightingale underwent the first of several experiences that she believed was God's call to devote her life to the service of others. This feeling of vocation did not go away, and later she wrote to her sister "God called me this morning and asked me would I do good for Him alone" Consequently, despite the anger and distress of her family, she rejected the expected role for a woman of her status to become a wife and mother and in her mid-20s undertook to educate herself in the art and science of nursing. Widely travelled, Florence spent time with a Lutheran religious community in Germany and observed the work being done to aid the sick and deprived. It was while with this community that she received four months of medical training which formed the basis for her later nursing care. It proved to be a pivotal moment in her life.

Through her social connections, she became the superintendent of the Institution for Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances in London, where she

successfully displayed her skills as an administrator by improving nursing care, working conditions, and efficiency of the hospital. After one year she began to realise that her services would be more valuable in an institution that would allow her to train nurses. But circumstances in the wider world were to direct her way forward to the work for which she is probably most famous.

In 1854 France and England were at war with Russia. When reports filtered back to Britain of the conditions of the wounded at the military hospital at Scutari, Nightingale, a staff of 38 women volunteer nurses and 15 Catholic nuns were sent. Nightingale arrived at the Barracks in Scutari early in November 1854. Her team found that poor care for wounded soldiers was being delivered by overworked medical staff in the face of official indifference. Medicines were in short supply, hygiene was being neglected, and mass infections were common, many of them fatal. There was little equipment, a shortage of food and organisation and administration was inadequate.

After Nightingale sent a plea to *The Times* for a solution to the poor condition of the facilities, the British Government commissioned Isambard Kingdom

Brunel to design a prefabricated hospital that could be built in England and shipped out to them.

It is said that as a result of Florence's intervention, the death rate was reduced from 42% to 2%, simply by making improvements in hygiene and by implementing basic sanitation such as handwashing. With overcrowding, defective sewers and lack of ventilation, Nightingale's mediation with the British government resulted in the Sanitary Commission being sent out to Scutari to address these issues.

Nightingale argued that most of the soldiers at the hospital were killed by poor living conditions. Carrying this ethos into her later career, she also reduced peacetime deaths in the army.

She spent many hours in the wards, and her night rounds giving personal care to the wounded established her image as the "Lady with the Lamp."

*The Times* Newspaper of the time reported: -

"She is a "ministering angel" without any exaggeration in these hospitals, and as her slender form glides quietly along each corridor, every poor fellow's face softens with gratitude at the sight of her. When all the medical officers have retired for the night and silence

and darkness have settled down upon those miles of prostrate sick, she may be observed alone, with a little lamp in her hand, making her solitary rounds.”<sup>1</sup>

When she returned from Crimea, Florence used her access to people in high places to transform nursing in the UK.

In November 1855, during a public meeting to recognise Nightingale for her work in the war, the Nightingale Fund was established for the training of nurses. There was an outpouring of generous donations, giving Florence £45,000 to set up the first nursing school, the Nightingale Training School, at St Thomas' Hospital in 1860. The first trained Nightingale nurses began work in 1865 becoming matrons at other establishments.

In the same decade, Florence lobbied for compulsory sanitation in private houses urging the minister responsible, to improve the proposed Public Health Bill by requiring owners of existing properties to pay for connection to mains drainage.

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<sup>1</sup> *William Russell, Cited in Cook, E. T. (1913). The Life of Florence Nightingale. Vol. 1, p. 237.*

Throughout her life Florence found great comfort in her religious beliefs and had a deep personal devotion to Christ, feeling that genuine religion should be evident in active care and love for others.

Florence Nightingale died peacefully in her sleep on 13 August 1910, at the age of 90. Her relatives turned down the suggest of burial in Westminster Abbey and she is buried in the churchyard of St Margaret's Church in East Wellow, Hampshire, She is commemorated by the Church of England on 13th August.