



*Rev. Ron Bushyager is not only an Anglican priest but also a respected psychotherapist so it was a privilege to hear what he has to say about our subject at the beginning of this week when Tuesday 10th October has been designated as 'World Mental Health Day'. 17% of UK people experience a common mental health problem in any given week and 30% of our visits to the GP are mental health related. These percentages will be true in our congregation, so it is important for us to learn to talk about mental health in our church, so the potential for embarrassment is reduced and the shame of 'failing spiritually' is denounced. (No room for questions – discuss on the way through!) **Matthew 13: 31-33.***

A. The Mustard Tree and Mental Health.

- 1) Jesus refers to the mustard tree to explain the way the 'Kingdom of Heaven', which is the Rule of God in our lives, works: starting with a tiny, **healthy** seed, surrounded by fertile soil and nurtured by a **supportive** gardener it **grows** into an enormous tree
- 2) The Christian faith can offer health, growth and support for people affected by a mental health diagnosis. Grace and compassion removes self-condemnation and gives people room to breathe so their health improves, they are given space in which to grow naturally (like the mustard seed) and find themselves being supported by the Christian community.
- 3) But sometimes the Christian faith becomes part of the problem. We don't grow because we feel we'll never achieve 'Christian' standards, our experience of owning our vulnerability is met with rejection instead of support (probably through ignorance) and God doesn't seem to be taking away our problems, so our mental health doesn't improve.
- 4) So we need to get talking about mental health in church and to see how our faith is designed to support it. Exploring mental health is not just for those with an existing diagnosis: we all have an interest in discovering ways of strengthening our emotional resilience and improving our reactions to stress and pressure. However, we need to beware of some Biblical statements which are fine in the right context, but don't relate well to mental health issues.

B. Five Statements to avoid when addressing Mental Health.

- 1) **"You have been changed by God: you are a new creation, you can leave your old ways of thinking behind". 2 Cor. 5: 17; Ephesians 4: 22-4.**
 - a) Many will find these verses really helpful: there's an improvement in emotional state (**health**), a feeling of security among new Christian friends (**support**) and a sense of spiritual awakening and new purpose (**growth**).
 - b) But others may find persistent anxiety or depression remains and feel they are a failure for not being able to change.
 - It is often necessary to GROW before we can CHANGE: change takes TIME. Patience is needed.
 - 'The essence of sin is "disordered love"'. (St Augustine). It takes time, space and a judgement-free environment to unpack 'disordered love' and realign our lives. The Christian faith and mature and healthy Christian relationships can offer this space for growth.
 - c) Some have been praying for years that God would change them but there is no relief and no progress. In this case, please STOP PRAYING! Instead work out what way you need to grow, what relationships you need to change, what goals you are reaching for – and then start praying again. Our faith is designed to be reflective and open and it is meant to involve the support of the Christian community.
 - d) Also, many of us will always struggle with a mental health issue. It doesn't go away and it has to be managed. Paul talks about his 'thorn in the flesh': 'a messenger of Satan, to torment me'. It never went away, but he didn't see it as a spiritual failure. Paul saw it as a reminder of the contrast between his vulnerability and Christ's power. **2 Corinthians 12: 7 – 10.**

Jesus is always compassionate to people who are stuck and in need. (eg. The woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well. John 8: 1-11 and John 4). He never condemns but over-steps judgement, offering grace and acceptance.

2) “Just believe in the truth that God loves you, accepts you and forgives you”. John 8: 32.

a) In the New Testament, ‘Truth’ is understood relationally and experientially. Truth is less about facts on a page, or a doctrinal statement and more about how someone or something is experienced in practice and able to be trusted.

b) Jesus says ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ **John 14: 6. 1 John 3: 18:** ‘Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth’. We need the experience of something or someone, before we can be confident to call it true.

d) Our greatest impact lies in living out the truth authentically rather than telling people what to believe. This is almost certainly the reason the Alpha Courses have been such a successful ministry for the churches.

3) “Don’t be sad, rejoice in the Lord: say to your soul ‘rejoice’.” Philippians 4: 4-7.

a) Joy is not a more ‘Christian’ emotion than sorrow, sad is not bad: sad is part of life and there are many biblical examples of sadness. Otherwise there wouldn’t be a book called Lamentations and we’d lose half the Psalms. **Ecclesiastes 7: 2.** It is better to go into a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting. i.e. It is better to stay with difficult feelings than to flee to something easier (and perhaps unhelpful or harmful).

b) The Bible records Jesus expressing joy once – when the 70 returned from their missionary journey. He shows compassion five times with a Greek word meaning gut-wrenching. His anger is a ‘teeming displeasure’ and He knew grief and sorrow. Jesus was not a ‘be happy’ guy nor a ‘keep it rational’ man. He was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief.

c) Avoiding sadness is avoiding the truth about someone’s reality. A depressed soul may just need to be sad alongside you.

4) “You have a demon, that’s why you are not in your right mind”.

a) Many who experience mental health problems have a sense of not being themselves, of being controlled by outside sources. Those with psychotic issues can feel they are being told what to do by God. None of these things relate well to the Biblical accounts of ‘demon possession’.

b) Also, it is very distressing for someone who is concerned about their mental health to be told they have an evil presence influencing them. It adds to their anxiety and worry.

c) Calling something demonic locates the problem outside the individual, who then feels it’s nothing to do with them and they just need to get rid of the ‘bad thing’. It is much better to get someone to take personal ownership of their mental health and accept what needs working at and what needs to change. Saying it’s all about demons or negative spiritual forces does more to increase the problem than diminish it.

5) “God won’t test you beyond what you can bear”.

a) A phrase said in many Christian settings which leads to all kinds of self-judgement. But it simply is not in the Bible. **1 Cor. 10: 13** says God won’t **tempt** you beyond what you can bear: that is very different.

b) Trauma traumatises, overwhelming stress leads to burnout and breakdown and the perfect storm of tragedy mixed with unhelpful coping strategies can lead just about anybody into reactive depression.

c) In the midst of extraordinary pressure and threat Paul heard the Lord say, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness’. Like Paul, we need to develop a good relationship with our own weaknesses and realise that even when we are at breaking point, there is still acceptance and grace through faith

C. How can the church help when it confronted with mental health issues?

1) By recognising that they are part of life both inside and outside the church. It really is time to let go of the stigma around mental health and realise that depression, anxiety and other issues affect many of us at a clinical level, whether we are Christians or not.

2) Show active compassion and draw near to the pain of others in an unobtrusive way, sharing their feelings. Offer help in a boundaried, appropriate & sensitive way: mourn w. those who mourn, rejoice w those who rejoice

3) Encourage someone to see a Dr or MH professional if they have never talked about their problems before.

4) At St Paul’s there is a pastoral team that can listen and care for people and pray at the end of a service.

5) Know that even if you are not feeling good, the act of communion together with other believers helps us to re-member, to re-join the faith and to re-align ourselves with the Christian story of re-demption and re-renewal

May we know the love and compassion of God for us, however we find ourselves today.