

Mental Health Sermon

Headington Quarry

Sunday 29th April 2015

Thank you to the Headrest Team and to Tim for inviting me to preach this evening. Mental health and society's awareness of mental health (or lack thereof) is a subject close to my heart. But my chief interest lies in the relationship between mental health and the church, and in particular, the role that liturgy has in informing our understanding of mental health and, even, in contributing a positive therapeutic response. So I'm impressed and heartened by the Headrest initiative which has evolved from a tutor group's discussion in the mean streets of East Oxford, namely St Stephen's House. And this discussion led to a theological reflection about the chief areas of need and concern within the deanery of Cowley. The group observed that Mental Health was one such area. The group sought to act as a resource, publicizing and illuminating people, events and services which provide a service for those who suffer from mental health conditions.

It seems to me that this work which is being gifted to the deaneries of Cowley and Oxford is both relevant and timely. Never have we faced such a need for awareness, knowledge and regard for the inner workings of our human selves than we do today.

My own interest in this field comes from my personal experience of mental health. Perhaps if I can openly talk about that, my example might enable others to begin a conversation, where appropriate, in order to begin the much needed process of talking about feelings, emotions, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This is an important, critical language to learn especially in the church where the F word is not used enough. That word which needs to be sung loudly and clearly is 'failure.' I think that it's vital that we develop an emotional and

psychological language which accounts for failure as well as success. There is a profound theology to be reflected on here!

The background to my thinking about mental health in the life of the church stems from the context of my experience of parish ministry – in particular, the ministry of St Andrew's, Fulham Fields in the Diocese of London. So first of all let me set the context for you... 13 years ago I accepted my first incumbency, a parish in West London, where my predecessor had been murdered by a man with schizophrenia who subsequently took his own life several days later. I inherited a community of people who had been through a terrible trauma. The community was fragile; a significant proportion of my parishioners suffered from mental health difficulties in different forms. As a parish priest I felt fairly overwhelmed by the degree and intensity of behaviours and dysfunction which I experienced – from the mildly eccentric to the personally dangerous. It was common to trot out the mantra, “they never taught me this at theological college!” I was fortunate in that my wife was and is a clinical psychologist and so the context which we were living in sparked a whole series of conversations between us about the place of the Church and its role in addressing mental health issues, and to what extent the Church is equipped to meet this need.

And so, not unlike the Headrest Team, we wanted to address this stigmatised area of life. Our response was to attempt to write a formal, text book account of mental health. In fact we ended up writing a much rawer, more personal account of mental breakdown and recovery. And we quickly realised that in order to look at mental health as a subject in an authentic way, we could not do so without looking at our own place on the mental health continuum.

So indulge me just for a while because I would like to read a short passage from this book, *Disturbed by Mind & Spirit: Mental Health and Healing in Parish Ministry*.

Our aims for this book were to increase awareness of mental health in the Church but also to consider how different frameworks - psychological and liturgical - can provide a tool for thinking about, and responding to, mental health needs. And finally, to consider the role of story-telling and story-listening in the process of healing. We talk a lot about mental health as a continuum: that, “Everyone has mental health needs, whether or not they have a mental health diagnosis. We can think of mental health as a continuum with people positioned at various points along that line at different points in their life.”

Promoting Mental Health: A Resource for Spiritual and Pastoral Care

I expect that you are all aware of the statistics which get trotted out so often, but tragically go unheard: An estimated one in six adults is likely to experience mental health problems at any one time. One in four adults is likely to experience mental health difficulties in different degrees during the course of one year. So this is about you and me, the church, the parish, our friends, our families. We are all in it, all of us, made in God’s image.

A great example of this mental health continuum was shown on the BBC a few years ago. The documentary, HORIZON, filmed a two-part special called, “How Mad are You?” in which 10 volunteers took part in a most unusual experiment. Over five days the group were put through a series of challenges - from performing stand-up comedy to mucking out cows. The events were designed to explore the character traits of mental illness and ask whether the symptoms might be within all of us.

Three leading experts in mental health attempted to spot which volunteers had been diagnosed with a mental health condition. I’m afraid that even the experts jumped to making assumptions and diagnoses which were ill informed, lacking compassion and kind regard.

What can we conclude from this? Our mental health comes in all shapes and sizes; and our vulnerability is not necessarily worn on our sleeve, but can be masked in a variety of ways. For me the programme reinforced a very important take-home message: we all have a place on the mental health spectrum and our position on that spectrum varies throughout the course of our lives. Of course, some have a predisposition to certain difficulties, but even so the complex interaction of biological, psychological and social factors cannot be underestimated, making it all the harder to form generalizations about mental health.

This is why Headrest should be congratulated on not becoming experts on this matter, understanding the need to become aware rather than to diagnose. So what role can the church play? I believe that it can go to the heart of the matter. If a church community has a desire to build relationships, it will naturally require a Christian empathy, a sense of inclusivity, building on an every person ministry where failure is a possibility. But one of the greatest gifts that the church has is its liturgy. This is the public work of God and through liturgy anxiety, disturbance and brokenness can be contained and to some extent transformed. This is the gift that a good-enough Church can give its parishioners. It can use its liturgy as a container, offer itself to be a sanctuary.

All the things that we know about good practice in the area of listening, holding in mind and building relationships of trust are demonstrated in the liturgy of the church. Through its order, its sacred stories, its prayers of intercession, its sacramental focus, it provides us with a feeling of being understood and heard. Liturgy offers a framework which encourages safe, boundaried and contained relationships to develop. This is a tried and tested work of God which has been experienced over the generations since its birth.

But more specifically it is within the Eucharistic rite that we are all invited to engage in the drama of God's story. This is the healing service par excellence which represents the paradox upon which the Church is founded – that new life is created through brokenness. The liturgy of the Eucharist takes the community of believers on a pilgrimage as God calls his people to care for one another. We give thanks that our humanity, disability and frailty may also be shared by God and so we meet the broken Christ in his vulnerability and glory. There are no quick fixes here, but by inviting an individual to attend the service, offering a reminder that it is there to be celebrated again and again in the same place at the same time each day or each week, offers an immediate opportunity for containment and healing. So we come full circle - the work of Headrest integrating itself with the work of God. Mental health is a shared responsibility between Christians and with God. So may the good work already established continue to enable peace and healing. Amen.