

New Kilpatrick

12th May 2019

Stories and Reflection

There are times... and usually... ultimately... they are good times... when we find ourselves in church... having conversations we haven't had before... thinking about issues we don't normally mention... at least not in church... because we didn't know the faith had an interest in these things... or the language to speak of these things...

This week... we find ourselves doing that... speaking faithfully... about the faith... and how that faith is interested... and speaks into our mental health... which we all have...

Yet despite 1 in 4 of us... at any one time... having mental ill-health... a conversation about mental health... is something we fear... find uncomfortable... and certainly don't easily understand... yet most of us... at some point... experience a mental health condition from anxiety to depression... bipolar to eating disorders... stress to dementia... and many more...

And we don't often look to the faith for support... because it has talks of sin... or demons... or we feel guilty perhaps... embarrassed we're not coping with things... feel inadequate because we don't feel strong...

There are certainly plenty of times... at 4 in the morning... I'm lying in my bed... I'm stressed about the complete demise of the church... which is my fault... Not the congregation only... but the entire church of Scotland... and while I worry about that I might as well let Brexit and Donald Trump compound that anxiety...

This is usually a Saturday night... and in the morning before church... I often find myself searching the internet for a new job... not a new congregation... But leaving the ministry entirely... because you aren't good enough...

Now... I have never done anything more about it than that... because for me... one thing always happens... Sunday comes... and we worship together... and that community... and those conversations... and that support... and love... is enough for me...

Until I go back home and then worry about how awful worship was... but I'll let my family tell you about that...

But I tell you that... not for sympathy... but because it is fairly normal... we all have mental health... it is our human condition... and our faith doesn't reject us because of that... In fact it loves us all the more... for when you explore our faith story... it is not a rare thing... to find some character in our scriptures... some main character for our faith... who suffers from mental ill-health... and this morning... in order to normalise mental illness... and recognise the love of God is found in and through and sometimes because of those people... we simply tell some for those stories...

But among these stories... we tell a few others too... from our wider world... from folk in places not like our own... people whose stories we know from Christian Aid... because while our personal mental wellbeing is important to God... so is that of our connected world... Those gifts we discover are good for our communities mental wellbeing... are the

same gifts... that look after the wellbeing of our global community... our neighbour near... and our neighbour far...

1 Samuel 16: 14-23

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, 'See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skilful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.' So Saul sent messengers to David, son of Jesse. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armour-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Let David remain in my service, for he has found favour in my sight.' And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Reflection

Saul... a much troubled man... beset by paranoia... with a depressive aspect... there... early in our scriptures... It is part of the human condition... part of the lives of God's own people... but it doesn't make God turn the divine back... instead it is such a person God loves... and includes... to unfold the story of the kingdom...

Perhaps it is the fear of talking about such conditions... that this story invites us to lay down... not the person... not the condition... but the whispering... the uncertainty of mental ill-health... talking of it as some evil spirit... It is part of our human condition... but without talking about it... normalising it... it brings fear... Here is a Christian Aid story about that...

Christian Aid

Tenneh Bawoh rests her three-month-old baby Ansumana on her lap. Tenneh and her baby are visiting a temporary health centre in Sierra Leone for a check-up. They're attended to by nurse Judith, who delivered the baby in this room, just a few months before. Thankfully, both mum and baby are healthy. But tragically, Tenneh has loved and lost a baby before. A few years ago, when Tenneh was pregnant with her first child, there was no health centre or trained nurse in her village. With no other choice, Tenneh was taken by her mother to a traditional birth attendant. For the two days of her labour, Tenneh was in agony. She fell unconscious, and was bleeding heavily. When at last she woke up, her whole body was swollen. In the days and months afterwards, Tenneh still felt very weak. Her baby wouldn't breastfeed. Tragically, her little one died when he was just three months old. 'I will never forget that day,' Tenneh recalls. 'I felt sick like I've never been sick before. I loved my baby so much.'

Notes

Tenneh's story can be repeated so many times... where we fall back on traditional ways of seeing things... because we do not... or cannot talk about them openly... the needs of a community...

In talking with a community about what a community needs for its physical wellbeing... Christian Aid has in this circumstance offered nurses... changing how people feel they are able to cope with the circumstances they have...

Talking about what our community needs in support for our mental wellbeing... we also change how people feel they cope with circumstances...

In each example... finding a way to talk together... allows awareness... learning... sharing our humanity... and invites us to shape a more supportive... engaged community... which is something many find difficult to find... which is where we find Elijah...

1 Kings 19: 4-13

Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.' Then he lay down and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place the Lord said to Elijah, 'Go out for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

Notes on the reading

Elijah has just taken on the prophets of Baal... in a show of strength... However he is left feeling exhausted... and so escapes into the wilderness... and perhaps we can empathise with Elijah... the anticlimax... but his reaction is a little more extreme... one more familiar to people who have bi-polar disorders also known as manic depression... Elijah isolates himself, and his self-care suffers...

This is one of the main prophets from our faith... and it is perhaps because of his condition... Elijah is able to see what we cannot... speak about what we cannot... There are folk there... more like us than we knew... who God uses... to lead God's people... who are known and loved and called... brought into the very centre of the circle of faith... which invites us to respond in an inclusive way... in our worship... faith... community... to those with a mental health condition... Its there in our tradition... part of the unfolding story of our faith... and here is an example of that in the next part of Tenneh's story...

Christian Aid

Christian Aid's partner RADA saw that Tenneh, and many mums like her, were in desperate need of healthcare... And that's how nurse Judith came to save lives... With expert love and care, nurse Judith delivered Tenneh's baby safely... But the health centre where nurse Judith works is not enough to meet every need. The roof leaks. There are only two delivery beds. And when mums come to deliver their babies at night, Judith has no light to see by. This makes giving birth even more dangerous... But we believe every life is worth fighting for... not just this Christian Aid Week...

Reflection

The gifts Judith the nurse brought were care and love... The expertise of medical knowhow... is vital... but first comes the the human gifts of care and love... It is where everything begins... in relationship with each other... globally and locally... physically and mentally... healthy wellbeing begins in good relationships...

But we know it isn't always like that and perhaps all of us can in some way... relate to the psalmist...

Psalm 130

*1 Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my
supplication.*

*4 I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope.
5 My soul waits for the Lord, more than the night
watch for the morning,
more than the night watch for the morning.
6 O Israel, wait for the Lord,
for with the Lord there is mercy;
7 With him is plenteous redemption
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.*

Notes on the Psalm

The sentiments may be very familiar to most of us from time to time... It is our human condition... and we are invited to name that condition... fear it less... share it more...

How many of the Psalms were written by David no one knows... but David himself... suffered from paranoia latterly... and it is from that experience perhaps... that human condition... these words become all the more significant and powerful for us... speak into who we are... with honest realism... There in our tradition... part of the unfolding story of our faith...

So perhaps there are times... when we find ourselves in church... having conversations we haven't had before... thinking about issues we don't normally mention... because we didn't know the faith had an interest in these things... or the language to use... or that it was safe to mention... or even that God knows...

But this week... we find ourselves doing that... speaking faithfully... about the faith... and how that faith speaks into our mental wellbeing... and says... we are loved... unconditionally...