

Mental Health Sunday
11 October 2009
Holy Covenant, Jamieson
Job 23.1-9, 16-17; Psalm 23; Luke 15.3-6

“I am for you”

A friend recently spent a week at a health resort – embracing its program of healthy eating, increased exercise and body tending (a massage every day!!). She showed us a group photo taken at the end of the week – mainly 40 or 50 something women, of variable shapes and sizes, all shining with the benefits of the week of body care. During the week the swimming pool was used to take some publicity shots for the resort. You can guess what happened! The pool was cleared of the real guests, and slender, youthful models were imported – this, we will be told in the marketing of the resort, is the picture of health.

I wonder how we picture *mental* health? And what might distort our thinking here.

The aim of Mental Health Week is to increase our understanding of mental illness, encourage the reduction of stigma and discrimination against people living with mental illness, and promote positive mental health. I think we are making *some* progress in relation to understanding mental illness and reducing stigma. There have been many helpful programs and initiatives working towards this. Did you know that we have a national mental health policy which establishes policy goals for the way in which we deal with mental illness and mental health problems? I didn't! (you can read it on the Department of Health and Ageing Website). It also includes policies for the promotion of mental health and prevention of mental health problems, and a bold goal to reduce the proportion of Australians with mental health problems, mental illness and at risk of suicide. Currently it is estimated that 1 in 5 Australians will suffer a (diagnosable) mental illness during their lifetime, and most of us will experience a mental health problem during our lifetime.

Preparing for this evening has inspired me to begin to think about what we mean by mental health. Of course there are lots of definitions one might pull off the shelf (or the internet...):

“the psychological state of someone who is functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment” wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn (not very inspiring! Depending on one's cultural context this might mean being well functioning robots

“a term used to describe either a level of cognitive or emotional well-being or an absence of a mental disorder” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_health (one of those beautiful self-deferential definitions)

I wonder how you imagine well-being? Does the Christian faith have anything to contribute to an understanding of mental health?

Our understanding of mental illness has change substantially since the time of Jesus. In the Gospels people who today would be diagnosed with a mental illness are often described as being possessed by demons. Unhelpfully, some parts of the church have perpetuated such terminology and inflicted further damage on already fragile people in the name of Christ. Perhaps this is part of your story – it is part of mine. This is not the Jesus I have come to know from the Gospels, who whilst living in the

context of a particular culture, with its particular ways of thinking, loved people beyond all labels, and reached out only to bring healing.

One of the good things about contemporary thinking about mental health and mental illness is that it recognises a continuum from health to illness. We all, at times, struggle with our mental well-being. Some of us, for various reasons, become ill. This seems to me to fit well with a Christian view of what it means to be a human being. You might recall an interchange with the Pharisees, who accuse Jesus of eating with the wrong people, with tax collectors and sinners: Jesus challenges them by saying that only the sick need a doctor (Matt 9.12). Where do you place yourself? he is saying, are you so different? One of the helpful metaphors that was used in the early centuries of the church was of Jesus as medicine. We are all partly unwell, we are all on the continuum, we all need healing.

Jesus was deeply concerned with well-being. The Hebrew word *shalom*, which we usually translate as peace, has just these connotations – a sense of wholeness, soundness, completeness, well-being in all its dimensions. In that beautiful resurrection encounter we read in the Gospel of John that Jesus appears among his frightened disciples and greets them “Peace (*shalom*, well-being) be with you.”

Not only is Jesus concerned with well-being, with *shalom*, he is identified with it. St Paul says that Jesus is our peace, our well-being, because he heals or reconciles our dividedness (Eph 2.14-17) – the way in which we are estranged from each other and from God. We might easily add here our inner dividedness – the ways in which we are estranged from our true selves: “We have peace (*shalom*, well-being) with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Rom 5.1)

How is this so? The reality is that we don’t always have such peace – well-being seems far away. There are times when the words of the old *Book of Common Prayer* ring true: “there is no health in us” (At this point it is important for us to let go of the burden of “shoulds”, as Christians we should be happy, up, etc. and from the lie that it is “lack of faith” that makes us unwell...)

Our reading from the Book of Job, puts before us starkly the sort of interior suffering that can sometimes propel us toward mental illness. “If only I could vanish in the darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!” Job cries out from a heart weak with despair. He is, here, imagining, even hoping for his own death. He has moved a terrible distance since his defiant declaration of faith at the time of the loss of his family and possessions. Grief, and the inexplicability of suffering, have gnawed away at his sense of self, his well-being, and his sense of God. God now seems completely and utterly absent.

The Psalm 22 speaks of the same sort of experience:

My God, my God why have you forsaken me?
why are you so far from helping me
and from the words of my groaning?

My God, I cry to you by day, but you do not answer
and by night also I take no rest.

This sense of abandonment, of utter aloneness, of being trapped and isolated in an envelope of suffering is at the heart of the experience of mental illness. “I am a worm and no man” says the

Psalmist, “the scorn of all and despised by the people”: a sense of shame, of being looked at/stigmatised, intensifies the suffering.

The little known nineteenth century French priest and spiritual director Abbé Huvelin understood this from the inside – in his own life he struggled almost continuously with depression and desolation often to the point of suicide. Today, of course, help in the form of anti-depressants or other therapies may well have helped him with this debilitating illness. God does not will this suffering. But this experience did give Abbé Huvelin an extraordinary compassion for the suffering of others and an understanding of how God stands with us in this place of terrible abandonment. The Psalmist’s cry, “My God, my God why have you abandoned me” is Jesus’ cry from the cross. Huvelin says this:

Jesus wanted to suffer because suffering is the great problem, the great objection.[explain]
There is nothing more terrible than that which comes out of an unhappy heart . . . Why does [Jesus] suffer? Why is He on the cross? It is for you, to be with you . . .
(quoted in Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991, p18)

The heart of Jesus is open to suffering. This is what Psalm 23 is saying when it speaks of God walking with us through “the valley of the shadow of death”. And even more beautifully in the parable of the lost sheep. Not only does God walk with us, but God seeks us in our lostness. God does not flee from our suffering – quite the contrary.

This beautiful icon encapsulates much of this for me. Let me share some reflections...



In the Orthodox tradition icons are considered to be windows to the Divine, as way of understanding or experiencing the spiritual world, the world beyond our normal senses. They are theology in colours. They are considered to be sacramental, mediators of the presence of God.

This is a 19th century Russian icon, of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Whilst representations of Jesus as shepherd were among the earliest representations of Christ that we have, it did not become a regular subject in the icon tradition. This icon looks to be heavily influence by Western art.

When I first saw this icon, I was particularly struck by the huge, grey cloak billowing out from Jesus' shoulders which looks like a stormy sea. As though he is carrying all the storms of our lives.

The Good Shepherd carries the lost sheep – bigger and muddier than your average lamb, which is the usual fare in depictions of this Gospel story. That's me, you, all those who struggle in our lostness. The sheep looks to Jesus.

Jesus is clothed in deep pink- red tunic – the colour of the heart and blood and life – there is a sense here of the open heart.

Faces in icons don't express emotions in the way we often see in Western religious art. Looking at the face of Jesus we see there, not "stoic" bearing up in the face of suffering, but a deep stability in this face. A sense of deep presence . . . "I am" ... I am for you.

Perhaps, here, we have an icon of mental health.

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The icon can be found at <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shep01.jpg>