

Proper 18 Year C, Mental Health Week

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

If you would be happy, never walk with the wicked, never stand with sinners, never sit among cynics, **but delight in the Lord's teaching and study it night and day.**

You will stand like a tree planted by a stream, bearing fruit in season, its leaves never fading, its yield always plenty.

Not so for the wicked, like chaff they are blown by the wind.

They will not withstand the judgement, nor assemble with the just.

The Lord marks the way of the upright, but the corrupt walk to ruin.

Luke 14:25-33

We're in the middle of Mental Health week, and Mental Health is what this sermon is about.

A letter in the *Church of Ireland Gazette* a couple of months ago asked why the church officially 'has nothing to say in relation to the one in four people who attend our parishes every Sunday ... [who] at least one time in their life experience serious problems with their mental well-being?' There are plenty of resources on interfaith dialogue, building maintenance, liturgy, finances, children's work, environmental concerns, but nothing to help people who are struggling with mental health issues. I meet many people who tell me they are clinically depressed but do not wish it to be widely known. At least two rectors in Co Laois have stated publicly that they suffer from depression, and one makes no secret of the fact that he is on antidepressants, and has been for over 5 years.

Some of you are on antidepressants, some have been, some will be, some cope without medication. Some people barely cope at all.

Society and the church have a peculiar pre-scientific attitude to mental illness. There is still the notion hanging about that it is the sufferer's fault, that it's because of something they did when they were young. Or that their brain isn't quite as good as other people's. These attitudes are like those stupid notions that say colds are caused by people having wet feet, or that you shouldn't touch people with psoriasis. All complete twaddle.

Jesus went about healing. He exorcised demons. And I have preached often enough, and will continue to do so, about how becoming obsessed by possessions, or needing to control, certainly do lead to neurosis. Last week, we explored some of the issues around pride and humility. And how pride, in one or more of its forms, leads us to think that what 'I' want is more important than what 'you' want. These are all demons of one sort or another: the demon of greed, the demon of envy, the demon of pride, the demon that makes us want to seek approval from someone else. And yes, these are all things that can lead us to neurosis, even psychosis, as we become obsessed by something or someone. These demons cause theft, acts of revenge, threats of physical violence, actual physical violence, murder.

Depression can arise as a result of circumstances: poverty, trauma, helplessness, being conflicted by what you think and the need to please someone else. Parents can be so mentally oppressive to their children that the children suffer. This sort of depression, a consequence of external events, is called exogenous. It's likely that it will improve when circumstances change or are worked through.

On the other hand there's endogenous depression – that is, depression that is, as it were, inbuilt. Schizophrenia too. These conditions arise from an inbuilt tendency. Genetic maybe. Chemical imbalance in the brain possibly. Maybe even a structural thing in the brain.

Some people need chemicals, some need counselling, some need both, on and off.

People who have depression are not second-rate, they deserve better from the church as an institution than to be brushed under the carpet. It could be that people with depression are not in any way second rate people, but rather that they are more sensitive and see more clearly. That they need something to cope with the strange society in which we live. After all, some of you cope with life with golf, or booze, or even religion.

Society doesn't look down on people who take antibiotics, so why should those on antidepressants be sneered at?

Every one of us, according to orthodox Christian teaching, is made in the image of God. If that image

includes a tendency to depression – or any other condition for that matter – then that condition too is in the image of God. Those of us who are free from that condition have no business to do anything other than support the sufferers. And if you are free from it, don't be complacent – it, or something far worse, might be developing in you this very minute.

Please support Mental Health Week in whatever way you wish. Become a confidant, give money, seek out someone with depression and offer a listening ear. But don't try to cure them, don't tell them what to do, and certainly don't tell them to pull up their socks up!