

Inclusive Church - Mental Health

1 Kings 19:1 - 6
Matthew 17:14 - 21

The first thing to say is that Jesus Christ, the son of God, can and does heal people of any and all kinds of sicknesses and diseases - be they physical or mental. So I believe this actually happened. But just because God continues to heal doesn't mean that everyone will be healed, right here and now on earth. We don't know God's plans, and it is harmful and hurtful to go up to people and 'have a go' at healing them!

The Second thing is that in Biblical times, mental illnesses, well most illnesses, were not understood very well, and they were 'spiritualised'. Someone is born blind - they must have sinned, someone else has seizures - its possession. We in our modern times we've got much better at diagnosing and labelling - but sometimes that doesn't actually help the person. Naming it often does not give us the power over it we would like. What Jesus saw was a person, often frightened, in pain, and he showed compassion.

Thirdly - you'll have gathered that in our Inclusive Church services we've finally moved away from sex. Some relief perhaps! So this week we're looking at Mental Health, and next week, as well as voting on whether to declare ourselves inclusive, we're also looking at rich and poor.

Its reckoned that mental health issues will affect 1 in 4 of the population at some point in their lives. 1/4 of us will struggle with illnesses and disturbances of the mind, that might be lifelong or might come and go.

As we've looked at different areas of inclusive church I've noticed that they are things people have no choice over - being a woman, or being a different race, or gay or poor or disabled.

And some of our differences are very visible - if you're black or white or in a wheelchair.

Some of our differences can be hidden or suppressed - if you're rich or poor, or your sexuality.

But mental health is often not immediately visible, but neither can it be covered up. In one of my churches in central London there was a woman who used to shout out every time we said the Lord's prayer. She heard voices and she wanted to tell them to shut up. She couldn't control it, and the congregation got used to it, although she was always very embarrassed.

So what sort of things are we talking about?
I'm going to split things into 2 here -

There's mental health conditions. Which includes depression. I want to differentiate the mental health condition of depression, with the very normal part of the grieving process which is depression. Of course they're linked, but depression is a serious, common, horrible condition, it can be mild or chronic, sudden or gradual.

And its been diagnosed in several places in the Bible - Jeremiah, not called the Weeping Prophet for nothing, and he had some bad experiences that would make anyone depressed. And Elijah, as we heard today - so fed up, so down, he wants to die - suicidal ideation as its known.

Other conditions would be psychosis - sort of delusions really, out of touch with reality, or in touch with a different reality - again in the Bible - you see Nebuchadnezzar who goes mad for 7 years in the book of Daniel, and some of Ezekiel's visions probably come under this.

There's better medication for psychosis these days but its a horrible condition that leaves people living in fear, terror, and feeling disconnected and isolated

King Saul might well have been suffering from manic-depression or being bipolar - one minute he was ok, the next he was throwing spears at poor old David.

There's nothing new about mental health - as I said about the person Jesus healed - these things have always been around, but we label them more, and there are a lot more humans, and the

world is much more pressured, complicated, demanding, out of touch with nature, than it used to be.

But these illnesses can strike anyone at any time. And they are disconcerting.

The person you thought you knew has suddenly started shouting at the bins, are they ok?
Am I safe?

Its not like - oh they've got a broken arm or they've lost their wife - its like - something wrong inside - they're unpredictable, disturbing, dangerous.

And we know that there's not a simple medical cure. We can't see what it is.
It frightens us.

Someone said, why can we put up with the noise of children in church (maybe 'put up' is not the right word) but when people start shouting things out or making odd noise we can't?
Its because we expect children to behave like that, but not the adults

Given that 1/4 of us will suffer mental illness, its important as a church that we think about how we welcome those people - what it would mean, what we would struggle with. Maybe even what the limits are - in order to keep everyone else safe.

Before I talk about that I want to talk about a second group of people who are part of the inclusive church statement - the neurodivergent.

What does this word mean?

Well there was a time when we said that some people were 'normal' and other people had a 'condition' - like Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's - that kind of thing.
But using words like 'normal' and abnormal makes people stigmatised. It increases fear - ooh what have they got? Normal and abnormal increases the 'us and them' mentality which we're trying to avoid. So there's neurotypical - brains that are wired, generally, in a particular way, and neurodiverse, which is brains that are wired a bit differently - not wrongly, not badly, just differently. So people who are autistic process the world differently.
They often have strengths in areas that neurotypical people are weak in - such as memory, or 3-D visualisation, mathematics, or patterns.

So those who are neurodiverse might find the way we do church a little challenging. The volume of the music, for example, or how close people sit to each other, the lack of freedom to come and go, or when there's a more informal structure might be less containing for them.

How do we help a neurodivergent person to encounter God, to be part of the worshipping community? Is it possible? Or do we say - Jesus died for you, but don't come here, good luck?!

And some neurodivergent people will also struggle with mental health.

So here's the scenario

We've got someone over here - who's weeping with depression, someone here who can't sit still and has to keep coming and going, someone over here who just wants a quiet space, and someone here who is muttering to themselves and shouting out.

Can we cope? Has it spoilt our Sunday? How can we possibly welcome all of those? And if we spend our time attending to those needs, then when do we get our time with God?

Its a challenge to be an inclusive church - its much easier to be a selective, exclusive community, where only those who look like us and act like us are welcome, but I don't believe that's what Jesus did, or that that is what the kingdom of God looks like. If Jesus died for all, then he died for all - and somehow the church has to cope with what that means.

Thank the Lord for the Holy Spirit - we are not left to cope on our own.

Let me finish with a little thought...

The Church of God is a family - Christ's body. To belong here, is to have life.
St Paul's most extreme sanction for someone misbehaving was to have them thrown out of church.

In this body we see Christ in one another, we act like Christ, we play different parts.
And as we are united in Christ, so we are also affirmed in our uniqueness, our individuality.
Jesus called me, Simon, here - he didn't want an average white guy.
He wants you - not just a woman with your sexuality.

Sometimes the trouble with inclusivity, just like mental health and neurodiversity, is that we focus too much on the labels, the diagnosis.

And the point and purpose of being an inclusive church is not to have solved some formidable riddle or puzzle about how to have a building that is light and dark, and wheelchair friendly but has seating, and services that are loud and quiet and all these contradictory things.

Inclusive church is not a manual, a how-to guide - ahh I've got someone with this disability or this gender, or this mental illness, what do I have to do?

The point is to welcome the people who come, who God sends,
To find out what they need, that individual.
To offer them understanding and care

And to admit that - this is about me, as well as you,
That I like to read my prayers, sing my hymns this way, and the fact you don't.. is a challenge.
this is our stuff, our prejudices and foibles.

Somehow we have to see that God sends us people to challenge us, to help us grow - we think we're 'helping' them, but really we'd never get out of comfort zones, comfort blankets, if we didn't meet them, if God hadn't sent them to be part of our community.

We are a community - where all, everyone, can belong.

Because to belong means that you have a place round the table, a place to call home.
To belong means others miss you, like the father missed the prodigal son.
To belong is to know that you matter

The kingdom of God is a place where we belong to each other to God