

Hexham Trinity Methodist Church

Sunday 24th March 2019 - 10:30am

Faith & Life: Mental Health - Sermon

Readings: Psalm 46 & 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

Over the last few weeks we've been reflecting in our morning services on questions of life and faith. Each of these questions have been different; faith during the week, money, fake news and rest coming next Sunday. The topic of mental health is different again, it's one which is often not talked about and often misunderstood, yet it is just as important as the other subjects we were looking at. Our whole life and being are important to God including our mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, not just our physical wellbeing.

I'm delighted that three members of our congregation have been willing to come and share with us this morning about their own mental health journeys and I'm delighted to welcome them to the front. I'm going to ask them all some questions to help us understand different aspects and perspectives on mental health.

- Can you tell us a little about your mental health journey?

- What have you found helpful or unhelpful during your mental health journey?
- How did your faith impacted your experience?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?

I want to say a huge thank you to those who have shared it is never easy to come and share from the front but I'm very aware of the particular vulnerability of coming to share about your own mental health in front of others.

Vulnerability, is without a doubt a key word as we reflect and think about the topic of Mental Health. To share with others about of our own wellbeing makes us vulnerable, whether that is physical, emotional, mental or spiritual wellbeing. To step out and offer help when we are unsure of where someone is at, or because we don't want to upset or offend someone makes us vulnerable; to be a trail blazer and be someone who reduces the stigma that surrounds the topic of mental health can make us vulnerable.

Yet being vulnerable isn't always bad, as Christians we journey through life with a God who knows what it means to be vulnerable, who knows what it means to step out of the place we know well into the unknown. When Jesus stepped out of heaven into the world, he stepped out in

vulnerability. In whatever area of our life we step out in, we step out with God - who knows what that vulnerability feels like.

Having heard from those who shared earlier about their mental health journeys and some of the different practical ways we can support those who are struggling with their mental health I'd like to offer two reflections from our bible readings today which I hope will help us as we think about faith and life: mental health.

The first is around the important Christian belief that God is present. Those who shared with us told us about times they knew God was with them on their journey. As Christians we know that God the truth that God is always with us yet that doesn't always mean that we see God at work easily ourselves or know how we can support others who are struggling to help them know God is there. Maybe you're wondering where God is in your mental health journey, or you're wondering how your life and faith can support others with their own mental health.

We started our service today with the words of Psalm 46, a well known psalm that reminds us that God is our strength

and refuge, that God is our very present help in times of trouble. God's permanent presence with us, is one of the absolute truths of Christianity, after Jesus ascends into heaven the Holy Spirit comes to be God's peoples help and guide here on earth, nothing can take God's presence by his spirit away from us. As the wonderful imagery of psalm 46 describes, no matter what we face, waters roaring, mountains trembling, kingdoms tottering God is always present with us. The psalmist also tells us to be still, to be still and to know God, who is exalted amongst the turmoil. For me there is always a direct correlation between how still I can be and how much I know God's presence and can feel the assurance that he is my strength and refuge.

The truth for Christians, is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is always with us, God is our strength and refuge and whether we are in the best place or the worse place, feeling level and balanced or in the depths of depression God is there with us, God does hold us, God offers us his love and care.

I recognise of course that for many who are in a season where they are struggling with their mental health, the idea that God is there, that God understands our vulnerabilities

is not an easy one to hear and is often easier said than done. That for some the idea that God is there, yet doesn't take away pain or disorientation or anxiety is a real struggle, that like so many aspects of life with our mental health we would like to be in the completed Kingdom of God now and not the Kingdom of the now and not yet - where the struggles of this world are all too real.

Some of you may have heard of the term 'the black dog' as a description of depression, a dog that one day or for a season comes and sits on you and you can't get out from underneath it yet another day or time isn't there. One of the realities of mental health struggles is that they can come and go without any rhyme or reason, or stay for a long time. As someone wrote in an article I read recently described it, *'my anxiety is like an old sports injury, I'm not ill all the time, but from time to time it raises its head and just like an old muscle injury I can't ignore it I have to face it and deal with'*.

Of course what doesn't change for us as Christians is that we are part of God's family, where we respond together to our needs and the needs of others. Together we know that God is present by his Holy Spirit, that doesn't mean that

individually we all have to be in a place where we are able to be still and know God, that doesn't mean we all have to be able to use all our gifts simultaneously. As a community working together at different times, different people will be able to draw close to God and if, when we do we are open to God's guiding and prompting then we will know ourselves that God is our strength and refuge, but if we follow his promptings to support other - send flowers, to offer a word of encouragement, to pray, offer God in the ways those who shared earlier spoke of - then we will be the agents of God's refuge and strength to those who in a particular moment are not able to know it themselves, to help them feel God's presence through us.

A few weeks ago I was praying and felt God tell me very strongly to ring someone and tell them they were a blessing. I didn't know this person well, I didn't even have their phone number but I found it, rang them - they weren't in, so I text them. The response I got back was, thank you so much, that's so helpful, particularly today, please keep praying. I heard a few days later from someone else that the person concerned was having a really tough time, by being obedient to God I was able to offer God's refuge and strength to them, to help them to

know God is present. As a community I believe we can do this for one another and help people who are struggling to know God is there.

Sometimes the support we offer is momentary and a prompt from God, at other times the support we need to offer will be for a long time, for many their mental health challenges can be life long and the support they therefore need from their Christian community is life long. If we had a friend who's diabetes was kept in balance by insulin, most of the time we might not need to offer any support but we'd make sure we understood their needs and not offer them lots of sugar and we certainly wouldn't suggest they stop the insulin.

Similarly with a friend who we know has struggled with anxiety, depression, severe stress, who may be on medication to keep themselves in balance it's important we recognise what we can do to help them keep the balance, to recognise what is still going on underneath and still challenges them, to not say 'of you don't need those happy pills, of course you're ok'. If things change to notice and support, to simply be alongside someone, as Pooh and Piglet said to Eeyore '*we're sitting here with you because*

we are your friends and true friends don't care if someone is feeling sad or alone or not much fun to be around, true friends are there for you anyway'

I believe one of the ways that we can know God's amidst the challenges that our mental health can present to us is to know that God is with us and to be able to offer assurance to others who cannot in that moment know and experience that.

Alongside knowing God's presence ourselves and through others, the reflection I want to offer, that I believe needs to be spoken strongly today is that our mental health or our struggles with mental health are not the whole of who we are. Who we are before God is always more than one aspect we are aware of.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians St Paul talks about his desire to boast, we think about a vision that he has had - a particular blessing, but Paul is conscious of what his boasting might look like and how for some reason he cannot boast because of a struggle he is having. Paul talks about praying for what is preventing him from boasting, we think possibly a physical ailment or maybe anxiety,

about it being a weakness, a thorn in his flesh that stops him.

I want to be clear for a moment, Paul talks about his thorn coming from the devil, please do not think of mental health being afflicted on anyone by the devil, really clear about that.

Yet the image of the thorn in the flesh, the image of something lifelong, or for a period of time which we struggle with, that stops us doing what we feel we are called to or want to can be helpful. It can help us understand that some of the challenges we face are like thorns in our flesh, pointy, nasty, that get us and prevent us from living to our full potential.

But like a rose stem, the thorns that we know, the challenges we face are only one part of us, alongside them each of us also has a rose - in fact it maybe our rose which offers someone else a glimmer of hope. Roses need thorns but thorns are still beautiful.

St Paul talks about the fact that despite the thorn in his flesh God's grace is sufficient for him, in fact by boasting in

his weakness not his unexpected blessing, the power of God will dwell more in him.

Whatever your own mental health struggles, whatever your difficulties, whatever your thorn is, you are a beautiful rose - you are one of God's precious children and what God sees first and everyone else sees first is the beautiful rose. Yes the thorns are part of you, I'm not saying we ignore the thorns - in fact we should see them in each other and share them with each other so we can support each other, but they are not the totality of who you are, who you are is one of God's family, saved by God's grace.

I believe that knowing we are children of God, knowing that the thorns in our flesh are not the whole of who we are - we are people saved by grace and knowing that God is present with us - whether we glimpse him or others bring him to us - help us to live in the struggle, to live in the in between times, to live in the world we are all part of.

This morning we've heard some amazing testimony from those who shared earlier who have helped us to understand what a mental health journey can be like. I hope what I have offered is a hopeful reminder that in whatever we face

as Christians we face it with God, who is there with us and we face it with the knowledge that it doesn't define us, that what defines us is that we are precious children of God.

In a moment we're going to spend some time in quiet, the band will play and you can sing if you wish. Please use this time to reflect on where you are with God today, where your life, faith and the topic mental health intersect, what you need from God in this area of life. What support do you need, how can you know God with you, who can you offer God's presence too? How can you truly know you are part of God's family, saved by his grace. In the quiet pray for those who need God's help, care and presence today.

As we reflect together, roses (paper ones) will be passed amongst you, please take one, we hope these will be a reminder that whatever you face today, whoever you are seeking to support, who you are, who they are, are not a thorn in the flesh but a precious, beautiful rose, made precious and beautiful by the love of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ. Amen.