

Introduction to Mental Health Sermon Series

Hebrews 10:19-25 and Luke 4:16-21

Tim and Ellen have celebrated 25th years of marriage this week – doubtless when they got married here, they could never have imagined the colour and variety that family life would bring over the years. Times of great joy and celebration and times when it got tough and difficult, when the days were dark and it was a struggle. I'm not sharing secrets here, I'm just talking about the reality of life for all of us. We can all look back through life and see lots of ups and downs.

It's like that in our emotional life, our physical life and in our mental health – a line that is never just on one level, but full of ups and downs, light and dark. We have times when we cope, when life is good and we have times when it's all very overwhelming and we're never sure how things will turn out.

For some, a down day or week can turn into months or years. For others, the challenges they face in how they engage with the world can be a daily mountain climb. Mental health issues aren't just about feeling a bit glum, but can be a huge loss of wellbeing, no sleep, no energy, no motivation, loss of self worth. And all of this is compounded by a society that struggles to understand how to support those who are experiencing mental health issues. And so if I were to ask you if you'd ever broken a bone or had a serious illness, many of you might put up your hands and share your experience. But if I were to ask if you or someone you love has experienced issues with your mental health, fewer would respond.

Because there is a huge stigma about mental health, some consider it to be a weakness of mind or character – “why don't you just pull yourself together” – and so for those who are struggling, the stigma means a retreat into shame and fear of discovery.

But we are Christians. Shouldn't it be different for us? You know one in four people will experience an issue with their mental health at some point during their lifetime.

That's a quarter of the people here this morning. This is not anything to be ashamed of. It's a truth. A reality.

And so is church a safe place for people with mental health struggles? Sadly, not always. Rather, churches can sometimes be particularly judgemental and uncompromising. Christians can have exceptionally high expectations of other Christians. It's not always helpful.

For us as a church family, we experienced the stark reality of mental illness when Marian died in June – she had lived with depression throughout her adult life, she was quite open about it. And she received a lot of love and care and support from her family and friends.

But when the disease stole her away, we were all left with questions and huge feelings of loss and inadequacy. The truth is that it is highly unlikely that ANY of us could have said or done anything that would have made a difference. But it certainly exposed us as feeling ill informed and ill equipped.

It's because of Marian that I want us to talk about mental health in our sermon series this Autumn. Not so that we become experts, but so that we become more loving, more understanding, more patient and more Christ-like in our response. So that we may see people, rather than the condition they live with. The person, not the problem.

Our Hebrews reading shows us the strength of being together as a church – we are one in Christ, he gives us hope, forgiveness, faithfulness, love and encouragement. That sometimes means looking at the tough stuff together as well as the shiny happy stuff. Being part of the family of God should be a safe place. One where there is love, laughter, truth, acceptance. Not a place of judgement, gossip, intolerance and selfishness. Not a place where we need to wear a mask or veneer of faith and niceness in order to be accepted. But rather a place where it's OK to be having a bad day, where it's OK to have a cry if we need to, where it's OK to share our frustration prayerfully with God.

Our church needs to be a safe place where it's OK for us to be us. Warts and all. Not where we diagnose each other, where we respond to other people's pain by trumping it with our own harder experience, or where we offer unwarranted advice. But rather a space just to be – in good times and in bad. Just like in the marriage vows – for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish.

Why, because that's why Jesus came, to bring life and light and hope to those who had none, because there was no one looking out for them. For those who were poor, imprisoned, blind and oppressed. He came to bring good news to the poor, freedom for the captives, sight to the blind and release for the oppressed. Hope for a broken world. Those living with mental illness often use similar language – imprisoned by feelings of isolation and shame, unable to see clearly, stigmatised and oppressed by their condition in the eyes of society. And it's a testimony to that same society to consider how we treat those who are out so far on the edge. Those who live with poor mental health, those with disabilities, those who are becoming frail and confused, those who have a low learning age – God sees them, God knows them. And the same needs to be for us – so that those who live this way are valued and loved with particular care.

If Jesus came for us and for them, then we need to offer a place for them to meet Him. And so that has to start with us. It starts with a challenge to our awkwardness and feelings of discomfort in even talking about this. We can all struggle to talk to someone who maybe doesn't respond with the usual "I'm fine" – for some people talking about feelings is just alien and not very British.

But if we believe that God sees us and knows us and loves us – then it's OK for us to be real about who we are and where we are at. And for us on the receiving end we don't have to make it better, we just have to acknowledge the reality. I'll say that again, we don't have to make it better, we just need to acknowledge the reality.

Many of us need to fix things, need to make it better. But with mental health issues that's often not possible. Rather people yearn to be heard, for their feelings to be

affirmed as valid and real, for someone to be alongside them in the pain and the struggle. That can be as simple as holding a hand in the silence.

We are often so busy to make it better, we skip the place of suffering. We forget to say how awful that must feel, or how painful it must be to be in such a place. Our God is a God who heals. But He is also a God who knows the truth of suffering. He was berated by the authorities, betrayed by friends, beaten, tormented and nailed to a cross – he knew pain, he knew desertion, loss, bereavement and desperation. Remember his words on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!” Christians who struggle with their mental health can be comforted by knowing that Jesus experienced suffering, but it can be a double edged sword when your life feels like it is permanently on Good Friday and Easter Day seems very far off.

So for us, over the coming few weeks, we are going to stay in the midst of the suffering. We are going to find out more about some key mental health conditions and some that impact our mental health. We will be challenged in what we know and in how we respond. Because I don't know about you, but I want to feel better equipped. I want to know what's a better thing to say or to pray. I want people to feel valued not judged and while I know I've got it wrong sometimes in the past, I want to get better at it in the future.

Will it be challenging – yes.

Will it be worth it – I certainly hope so

For some of you in home groups, you'll have the opportunity to talk further and share some of your own perspective and experience. I want to encourage you to enter into it. I heard that one group was going to try the first session and if it was too hard then not bother with the rest of them. Please persevere.

I hope that together we can learn things we'd never expected and as we move forward, help to support one another to create a safe space in our church, in our groups, in our families and neighbourhoods where it's OK to be who we are.

Our God is one that wants to see us healed and whole, but walks with us in our brokenness and struggle. Our God gives us hope, but knows about the darkness and helplessness we experience as we suffer. Our God knows that life isn't always bright and shiny and lovely, and he walks with us the same every day. He never leaves us or forsakes us.

For some this journey will be difficult – we are here to help and support you. There will always be people at the end of each service to pray with you if you want to. There will be others who will sit with you as the tears fall. For others the journey will challenge our preconceptions and our prejudice – we will walk patiently with you as we learn together.

Let us be understanding and loving as we negotiate this new path. We leave judgement aside and model ourselves on Christ – one who saw those who were poor broken and captive and came to bring hope, love, forgiveness and freedom.

AMEN