

QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY SERVICE – 13TH June 2010
Jeremiah 20¹³⁻¹⁵ and Luke 8²⁶⁻³⁹

The Two Sides of Mental Ill Health

I love visiting art galleries and exhibitions. I have already made two inspiring visits to both Nottingham Contemporary and the New Art Exchange. Rosemary and I received a wonderful painting last week, our farewell gift from Winchester diocese. It is a fabulous large picture of two lilies entitled 'Hope and Glory' by an inspiring artist Caroline Viney who lives in our former home of Romsey.

Today as we celebrate Her Majesty's birthday, we know she too loves fine art – and has quite a collection. The Cathedral Friends have a great lecture about this collection in October.

I love looking at the paintings of the great masters too. Van Gogh is one of my favourites.

Now I may fall in your estimation when I also tell you I love Dr Who. It is a shared family joy. So when I saw that a Dr Who episode was to feature the Dr meeting Van Gogh, I wondered what delights would be in store. When I further discovered that the episode was written by one of our finest comedy writers, Richard Curtis, and starred the great actor Bill Nighy, the prospect was utterly mouth-water.

I wasn't disappointed. It was terrific – lots of fun, clever art references alongside the weird sci-fi world that is the Doctor's.

What I hadn't anticipated was how carefully it handled how troubled a man was Vincent Van Gogh; his dark moods, his lack of self confidence and self esteem. The reality of depression. Alongside the positive truth that it was from this troubled mind that Vincent was able to see things differently, and to produce some of the world's finest art.

As Bill Nighy's character, the museum curator in Paris 2010 says *"He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty; pain is easy to portray but to use your passion and pain to portray the majesty, ecstasy and magnificence of our world, no one had ever done it before... that strange wild man... was not only the greatest artist but one of the world's greatest men who ever lived."*

Van Gogh highlights the twin realities of mental health – or ill health – its darkness, sorrow, tragedy, and its capacity to produce wonderful art, music, theatre and people.

Look at Stephen Fry who has done so much to help a clearer understanding of bi-polar, or the disturbingly powerful portrayals of Stacey Slater and her Mum in Eastenders.

The Reality of Mental Health

Mental health is a major issue for us to handle in our world. Such is the seriousness of the issue that last year's Good Childhood Report devoted an entire section to its findings on mental ill health in childhood.

"One in ten of all 5 to 16 year olds have clinically significant mental health difficulties. Many others of course face milder difficulties – but 10% have difficulties that are severe enough to cause major distress or impede their development in important ways... "

It further highlighted the reality that children and young people with mental health problems, if not treated, are significantly more likely to end up with severe mental health problems in adulthood.

"While conduct disorder that begins in adolescence is often temporary (disappearing when adult responsibilities arise) children who are seriously disturbed before they are 10 are highly likely to become disordered adults. For example; if we take children with conduct disorders at age 8, and look at their subsequent record in adolescence, 40% of them were repeatedly convicted of crime, or, looking back, 90% of adolescents convicted of crime had shown conduct disorder in childhood."

I note too evidence I heard this past week that there is a particular issue about mental health on our newest housing estates. It appears architects and planners need to pay more careful attention to the possible mental health impacts of how such estates are planned and built.

Children and young people with mental health issues are, therefore, more likely to find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system.

The percentage of prisoners with mental health issues is worryingly high. A failure to actually deal with these issues means custody is unlikely to do any more than keep these people “off the streets” / “out of the community” for a while.

Tackling the issue in childhood can prevent this development. Tackling it in adults in prison could mean they will be helped to not re-offend on release. So it is entirely appropriate, that in her year as High Sheriff, Amanda has chosen to support charities where particular concern is tackling the issue of, and supporting those who suffer from, mental ill health.

Looking at the Bible

Our two Bible readings illustrate the reality of mental ill health as a long term reality.

i) Jeremiah

Jeremiah was one of the great prophets of Israel. But his prophetic calling was not easy. His message ran counter to the general message of well-being put out by the nations' political and religious leaders. He foresaw judgement on Israel, and he was attacked, imprisoned, pilloried for speaking this message, and sticking to it.

This led to him having what can only be described in our day as deep bouts of depression – wishing he had never been born. He swings from praise to near paranoia very quickly. I am quite sure that in our day he would have been regarded by many as mentally unstable, possibly deranged, and perhaps bi-polar. But his words were preserved because they proved to be true. He spoke the truth. He declared the word of the Lord.

ii) Jesus and the Demonised Man

The man in our New Testament reading is very different. He was out of control, causing terror and panic. The community felt they could do nothing other than chain him – though the chains would not hold him. He was driven into a solitary, terrorised, demonised life. No one it seemed could help. Until Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene.

Jesus, it appears, brought evil forces out into the open; he exposed their power and hold on this man – and because of his compassion and care for all people, Jesus set the man free.

Now many of us might struggle with the language of the story; we might see it as an ancient cultural way of understanding something we now understand differently. This might be so but don't write this demonic force off too quickly.

In extreme cases, as a psychiatrist friend once said to me, this still might be the only explanation. Certainly I know of occasional rare cases where prayer for release from controlling forces has seen dramatic release.

However, the key point I want to make from this story is that there are cases in which mental ill health is nothing but destructive and terrorising for the person concerned – and for their families and the community. However, the Christian response to this should never be simply to shut it out of the way. It must be compassionate care that seeks to find a way to bring healing and release – and if that can't be found then the compassionate care must go on.

Seeking Mental Health

So we need to continually re-think our attitude and approach to the huge issue of mental ill health in our society – often expressing itself in addictive behaviours like alcohol or drugs, or eating disorders, or in depression and mania.

We need to recognise that people with mental ill health may, because of their condition, contribute positively to our society – through art, music, drama, dance, literature – and they even speak the truth of God to us.

But we also have to recognise the pain, anguish and cost for many, the inner prison that can be created through mental ill health. This demands our compassion, care and commitment to find ways of bringing healing and release. This is a task for us all, and has a particular relevance to all involved in the criminal justice system. It is a task in which the Church must play a full part seeing in Jesus Christ, the one who brings freedom and release from all the darkest powers – for in his death and resurrection he triumphed over them all.