

# We need to talk about mental health ...

2 July 2023

## BIBLE READINGS

### ***Psalm 34 (responsively)***

A psalm of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.

I will extol the Lord at all times;

his praise will always be on my lips.

**I will glory in the Lord;**

**let the afflicted hear and rejoice.**

Glorify the Lord with me:

let us exalt his name together.

**I sought the Lord, and he answered me;**

**he delivered me from all my fears.**

Those who look to him are radiant;

their faces are never covered with shame.

**This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;**

**he saved him out of all his troubles.**

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,

and he delivers them.

**Taste and see that the Lord is good;**

**blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.**

### ***2 Corinthians 1:8-10***

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has rescued us from such a deadly peril, and he will rescue us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to rescue us.

### ***2 Corinthians 11:21-28***

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have

been cold and naked.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my anxiety for all the churches.

## MESSAGE We need to talk about mental health ...

We hear a lot these days about the mental health challenges faced by sporting stars, young people, older people, gender diverse people and indigenous people, especially with the conversations around the Voice to Parliament.

But what do we mean by mental health or mental illness?

Doesn't everyone feel sad or stressed sometimes?

The Synod's Mental Health Kit for Congregations, published just before Covid came along, states that ...

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*Mental illness is characterised by a disruption in a person's thoughts, feelings or mood to a level that interferes with daily functioning and relationships.*

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So we're talking about a range of conditions that affect a person's ability to live a normal life, to interact with others and to look after their own needs.

Mental illness covers a spectrum of conditions from anxiety to addiction, from burnout to bipolar, from depression to dementia ... and the list goes on. Mental illness also varies in severity or intensity from feeling stressed to anxiety to burnout.

Some conditions are temporary and will pass, while other conditions are chronic and may affect a person throughout their life.

For years there has been stigma and shame attached to mental health.

It's something we find hard to talk about, even today. It's often an invisible illness.

Some people – perhaps many people - may think that this is a delicate topic best left to the mental health professionals – psychiatrists, psychologists and trained counsellors.

It's definitely true that these experts and the treatments they provide – including prescribed drugs – provide the bedrock for people facing mental health challenges. So if I anything I say this morning triggers something in you, please go and speak to your GP or contact one of the several mental health organisations ...

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So with these various helps available, why talk about mental health in church?

I think that there are three main reasons why we need to talk ...

First, the statistics are hard to ignore.

Mental illness is very common and widespread.

2 out of every 5 Australians will face a mental health challenge in their lifetime. 1 in 5 will face a mental challenge in the next 12 months.

If we extend this from direct personal experience to the lives of our loved ones and friends, then most of us know at least one person who is currently or will face these challenges.

*A quick show of hands ... who knows of at least one person in their family and friends circle who is facing a mental health challenge? ...*

Second, talking about mental health breaks down some of the stigma surrounding it. Right from the start we need to affirm that mental illness ...

- Is not a punishment from God
- Is not a sign of failure – of the person or their family
- Is not due to lack of willpower – as if just trying harder will heal mental illness

Mental illness can affect *anyone* of *any age*, just like cancer or diabetes.

Neither is mental illness a new phenomenon.

It's been part of the human struggle forever.

And it afflicts Christians just as much as non-Christians. As we'll see shortly, mental health challenges were faced by various characters in the Bible.

Third, I believe that our spiritual tradition offers insights and help that can complement other helps we receive from the medical profession and from counsellors ... not to replace them but to add to them.

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Before we get there, though, what's it like to live with mental illness?

This artwork by Melbourne artist Louise Marson shows both the dark and light places we go to in our minds and the thin crossroads that often separate the two.

Keep the image in mind you read a poem by Marion Lodge, who has suffered from bi-polar disorder or manic depressive condition all her life ...

Bi-polar disorder  
For that, certified  
Sent to Larundel



and locked up inside.

Alone in a bare room  
a mattress on the floor  
Footsteps departing  
beyond the locked door

Undressed, in a white gown  
Cut off from the world  
Identity lost  
My whole self unfurled

When darkness descended  
I thought I was gone  
No family, no friends  
Light no longer shone

I prayed and I prayed  
for although I was mad  
I knew I had lost  
the freedom I had

I cannot remember  
when rescue arrived  
My prayers were answered  
My hopes came alive

Released from my prison  
A God-given chance  
to slowly recover  
Take a new stance

Now, forty years onward  
from being a wreck  
Thanks be to my God  
I'm here, still on deck

Supported by family  
and aided by drugs  
I worship at church  
and thrive on the hugs

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Time for a quick pause and a chance to think ...

*Have you or someone you know faced mental health challenges?  
Where or from whom did they get help?*

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As I said before, there are multiple people in the Bible who faced mental health challenges if we dig just a little bit below the surface.

In the psalm we read earlier, David pretends to be insane to escape from a sticky situation. How did David know what to do, how to act as an insane person?

Presumably he'd witnessed mental illness in others, including in King Saul who had tried to kill David numerous times and who may well have been suffering from bi-polar. We'll revisit Saul and David's story in 2 weeks' time.

In the psalms there are many lament and complaint psalms that cry out for God's help. It's likely that the writers of these psalms experienced varying degrees of depression, anxiety and possibly PTSD [from severe trauma].

Then there were the prophets, also known as seers, because they sometimes saw visions ... like Ezekiel and his strange vision of God that begins his prophecy.

Prophets also claimed to hear God speaking to them and some did strange things ... again like Ezekiel who at one point receives a message from God to shave off his hair and his beard ... and to burn 1/3 of it, chop up and scatter another 1/3, and sew the rest into the hem of his garment, and later to take these saved hairs and throw them into the fire.

Someone who saw visions, heard voices and acted like Ezekiel, we may suspect of suffering from schizophrenia.

When we turn over to the NT, there is a story early in Mark's Gospel where Jesus' family come to 'rescue' him, as they think he has completely lost his marbles and gone crazy.

Later in the story, when Jesus is praying in the garden of Gethsemane, he is quite possibly suffering from acute anxiety ... a very human response to the fearful situation he was facing.

Turning to the readings from 2 Corinthians we heard earlier, Paul is sharing both his physical and mental struggles as he tries to defend his ministry and his reputation. Yes, he has faced difficult circumstances on multiple occasions – he writes about despairing of life itself – which sounds very dark – and being overwhelmed with anxiety – every day – for the church communities he has planted.

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Each week in this series, I want us to learn more about mental illness and mental health so we are better equipped to help others without judging them.

But I also want to offer a word of hope, of how our faith might help us face our mental health challenges.

Briefly this morning, I want to mention three sources of hope ...

*First, God loves us unconditionally*

... just as we are, where we are, struggles and all.

We are known, loved, valued and embraced for who we are.

That's an important anchor to hold onto.

*Second, Jesus' ministry included reaching out and helping people who today we would say were experiencing significant mental health issues.*

These people were often described in terms of having evil spirits or demons. Jesus did not ignore these people, nor judge them nor exclude them.

Instead, Jesus reached out with kindness and compassion and helped restore them to health and

restore them to their community.

We can learn much from the ministry of Jesus.

*Third, God places us in community and calls us to love one another, care for one another, carry one another's burdens. We're called to share our joys and sorrows, our laughter and our tears, and to listen deeply to each other.*

We do this imperfectly of course ... but it's good to know that we don't have to walk our journey alone, especially when the way gets difficult or dark.

Our next song picks up this theme, asking that each of us might have the grace both to serve others in their time of need - but also to receive help from others when we are in need ourselves.

**SONG**      TiS 650 Brother, sister, let me serve you

### BENEDICTION

Lord, when we are happy,  
when we feel your presence,  
when the sun shines upon us,  
**bless us.**

When we are sad,  
when we cannot find you,  
when the rain keeps falling,  
**bless us.**

Bless us with tears and laughter,  
with courage and curiosity,  
with hope and healing.  
**Travel with us and bless us with love.**