

Strength in vulnerability

16 July 2023

BIBLE READINGS

1 Samuel 16:14-23

Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.

Saul's attendants said to him, 'See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the lyre. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes on you, and you will feel better.'

So Saul said to his attendants, 'Find someone who plays well and bring him to me.' One of the servants answered, 'I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him.'

Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, 'Send me your son David, who is with the sheep.' So Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them with his son David to Saul.

David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armour-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, 'Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him.'

Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

2 Corinthians 12:1, 5-10

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ...

I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

MESSAGE *Strength in vulnerability*

One of the lingering effects of a disease like Covid is that we can feel weak and washed out, lacking in energy. But just as a physical illness can make us feel weak, so also a mental illness can make us feel weak. And as we saw last time our body, mind and spirit are an integrated whole so that the health of one part of us affects our overall health.



The apostle Paul knew plenty about weakness. He certainly suffered physical hardship as well as great mental anxiety.

In the passage we heard today he speaks about being afflicted by a 'thorn' in the flesh. What this affliction was we don't know. Many have speculated, but it's probably helpful that we don't know because then we can infer that our own afflictions may be similar to that suffered by Paul.

Whatever the affliction was, Paul pleads for God to remove it from his life, but that doesn't happen. Paul must continue to live with this 'thorn', just as many people must learn to live with ongoing or chronic mental health conditions.

Listen to a poem describing what it's like to live with anxiety ...

Worry builds
Concern erupts
Heartbeat racing
Fingers chill

Head is pounding
Legs go weak
Tummy turns
I can't speak.

It's my heart
Got to get out
Want to move
But I can't shout

I stand there
Words are whispered
Eyes are closed
My voice whimpers

Help is at hand
Calming slowly
Breathing better
Praying, thanks to Holy One

The horror is over
My voice is back
My body is working again
Goodbye anxiety attack

By the way, as I've said the past two Sundays, if anything I say triggers something for you, please go and speak to your GP or contact one of these services ...

<i>Lifeline</i>	13 11 14	www.lifeline.org.au
<i>Beyond Blue</i>	1300 22 4636	www.beyondblue.org.au
<i>Headspace</i>	(03) 9027 0100	headspace.org.au

Trying harder to fight a mental illness or wishing it away probably won't help anything, but what might help, according to Paul, is God's grace and strength that comes to us when we feel weak. It's when we feel weak and helpless that Christ's power can rest on us, says Paul. He may be thinking here of Jesus' death and resurrection – that Jesus was helpless and powerless in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross yet still trusted in God – and then was raised back to new life by God's power.

Paul may also be thinking of the qualities seen in Jesus' life – his gentleness, humility, endurance, ability to cope with rejection and persecution – that point to the weakness and vulnerability of Jesus. Yet God's power and strength and grace also rested on Jesus and enabled him to continue in ministry.

Much as we too can pray – like Paul – and cry out to God to give us strength in our weakness – this doesn't always help. So we need to turn to the professional help from counsellors and psychologists and prescribed medications that can make a big difference. Unfortunately, medications often come with unpleasant side effects. For instance, for the last few years of his life, my father was on a couple of anti-anxiety medications that helped calm his moods and control the hallucinations he experienced ... but the drugs made him feel very dopey so that he could barely open his eyes before midday and he found it hard to concentrate.

But there are other things we can do to improve our mental well-being.

Which brings us to the story of King Saul and his struggle with dark moods.

Before we explore Saul's story, though, a poem entitled *A black dog journey* by Jean Cornell.

These black dogs of mine crave attention -
they'd like to take over my life.
If I try to ignore or dismiss them,
they get up to all kinds of strife.

The four-legged one is less trouble
than the other black dog in my head.
Max is easy to soothe with a dog treat or two
and he sleeps with such bliss in his bed.

But this sick one in me is persistent -
he even inhabits my dreams -
inflates all my woes, and creates more of
those -
taking everything out to extremes.

When I need extra help to control him,
the psychologist's there as before,
and her practical skill tackles what makes me ill ...
'til I'm fit to go walkies once more!



So to the story of King Saul, Israel's first king, an imposing and tall man and a good soldier. As we read more about Saul, though, we find out that his behaviour is impulsive and erratic, swinging in mood from triumph to what sounds like deep depression. In today's reading we're told that an evil or dark spirit would come upon Saul, sent from the Lord no less.

Rather than an evil spirit, modern scholars suggest that Saul may have suffered from bipolar disorder which would explain his moods swings from buoyant to very dark.

Whatever the cause, one of Saul's advisors noticed that his mood was improved with music.

This advisor had heard of one of Jesse's sons, David, who had good ability with the lyre.

So David was recruited into King Saul's service and whenever the black moods descended, David would come and play soothing music and Saul would find relief and the black moods would lift.



So what sorts of things can improve our mental well-being and add colour and hope to our life?

For the writer of the poem about black dogs, Jean Cornell, it was having a dog, Max, as a judgment-free companion. The great thing about pets – and especially dogs – is their unconditional love and never-ending hope – for food! Perhaps pets give us a visible insight into God's grace and love.

For King Saul, it was having someone like David who could come and play music. It's well-known that music is a great way for people with dementia to feel uplifted. While they may struggle with names and faces and knowing the day of the week, music activates a different part of the brain and songs learned earlier in life are remembered and able to be sung. Humans have been singing for millennia of course, as singing – along with story-telling – have been shared around the campfire.

So over to you for a minute or two ... discuss with your neighbour what other sorts of things and activities can improve our mental well-being.

Suggestions offered include ...

- working in the garden
- making a hot chocolate or a nice cup of tea (or even just a square or two of chocolate)
- going for a walk – or a run
- listening to music or singing in a choir
- spending time in nature ... watching trees bending in the wind, smelling a flower, seeing drops of water on a spider's web, listening to birds
- volunteering
- cooking a favourite meal and sharing it with others
- calling up or meeting up with a friend
- writing in a journal where we record our thoughts and feelings
- getting off social media like Facebook and not watching the TV news
- coming to church or Drop-In or Fellowship

Another poem to finish ... about swallows ...

Getting ready for an epic journey.
For us it would be the journey of a lifetime.
For swallows, it's an annual event.
But it's not undertaken lightly -
lots of preening, short exploratory flights,
and, most importantly, gathering together.
The epic flight is made in a flock, together.
We like to think we are self-sufficient.
But alone can soon become lonely and limiting.
Better together -
stimulating, creative, encouraging, healing.
God, teach us to be unafraid of making ourselves vulnerable
and open to being loved.

SONG TiS 626 Lord of creation, to you be all praise

BENEDICTION

Lord, bless us when we're cheerful *and* when we're upset.

Bless us with healing and hope.

Bless us when we're relaxed *and* when we're anxious.

Bless us with healing and trust.

Bless us when we're calm *and* when we're angry.

Bless us with healing and peace.

Bless us when we're joyful *and* when we're weary.

Bless us with healing and strength.

Bless us when we lie awake *and* when we're sleeping.

Bless us with wonder, healing and love.