

Depression

Readings: 1 Kings 18: 16-39, 19:1-18

In the next in our series of 'today's issues', we move seamlessly from politics to depression!

That depression is a highly significant issue today is obvious. From a recent Times weekend supplement called 'Anxious Britain' we have:

- 70% of us are stressed
- 55% have been depressed, 59% anxious
- 20% have had therapy
- There are 31M antidepressant prescriptions a year

The **stigma** associated with all this – ah so and so can't cope, he or she gets all stressed under pressure and shuts down – dismissive put downs like that are less common than a few years ago but are still there.

Happily this is changing quite fast and for example the leading mental health charity 'Mind' (interestingly started as long ago as 1946) draws attention to some high profile cases:

Stephen Fry

Ruby Wax

Patsy Palmer (Bianca – Ricky)

I have just read the autobiography of Marcus Trescothick, Ashes hero, now retired from international cricket whilst managing this kind of condition.

Is there a Christian view on all of this? Are there examples of, if you like, a Christian approach to mental health and restoring that health in difficult times?

A biblical example I want to share involves one of the biggest hitters of them all, his descent into despair and suicidal thoughts, and the way God himself handled him, and brought him back to full mental health.

We had two long readings this morning and we are looking not at sound bites or texts but a longer narrative of God's dealings with one individual. Get the Bibles open!!p 345.

We will look briefly at Elijah's journey from **hero to zero and back** and see what we can learn.

By way of background.

In essence this. The Jews are now a divided nation – 2 kingdoms. After Solomon the ten northern tribes broke off and set up their own arrangements. Elijah lived about 50 years after the split here during the reign of the third northern king, Ahab. Ahab was a weak man and was dominated by his wife, a lovely lady by the name of Jezebel (Who remembers Frankie Lane?). In essence the proper worship of God had all but disappeared and most were now worshipping idols or Baals. Jezebel had introduced this. She was from outside Israel and Baal worship was her tradition. She imposed it on Israel. In God's name Elijah had challenged this and organised a contest to see whether Baal or YHWH was the true, all powerful God. On Mount Carmel altars were set up with animals ready to be burned. But no fire was to be lit. It was to come from God, either Baal or YHWH. That was the contest.

In outline note 3 things:

1. Elijah is a very big heroic figure indeed. He ranks alongside Moses, Abraham, David – he was taken up into heaven and reappeared as JB the forerunner of Jesus himself.
2. He is so close to God that he is mightily used. And he **revels** in it. Look at v 27!!

*²⁷ At noon Elijah began to **taunt them**. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.*

3. Yet almost no time at all after this amazing experience on the mountain Elijah is very sorry for himself indeed and is suicidally depressed. He seems to have forgotten the all powerful God he worships, who can answer by fire, and is now afraid of Jezebel.

³ Elijah was afraid ^[a] and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

We begin to see how, in scripture, from an event 2800 years ago, God has, you could say, kind of **anticipated** our 21st century problem and its stigma, and has put one of the greatest heroes of them all right in the centre of this particular storm. It really is remarkable.

Do study closely these two chapters and especially ch 19 to see something of **God's nature**. Briefly let's pick out three key elements:

- There is the equivalent of professional help – angels attend to Elijah. Today it might be therapy in the form of medication, counselling whatever.
- There is clear reference to diet, exercise, even a visit to an inspiring place – Mt Sinai (Horeb). Sound modern principles.

⁵ *Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.*

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ *The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.*

- There is a gentle reminder that he is not alone (in v 10 Elijah reckons he's the only one left but God tells him in v18 that there are another 7000)! There is even v19 onwards, a close colleague for him. Elisha – succession planning! We might see here the equivalent of support and self help groups so much at the centre of the work of the MH charity Mind as one example, and not a million miles away from our own Bible Study groups

In all of it we note 3 aspects of God's character:

- God's unfailing love and compassion
- God's understanding of the frailties of the human condition
- The absence of anger, expressed disappointment and frustration, or 'you've let me down'. There is nothing from God to engender a sense of guilt at all. We therefore need not feel that, or show that to anyone else.

There is help here for us all. But we must put that in context.

Elijah was helped through his problems because he had, deep down, **a genuine faith**. He wasn't just an occasional worshipper but a man with a passionate and energetic love for God and commitment to His work. Elijah took to heart the words of Micah '**Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God**'. That is an important beginning for any Christian approach to being fully healthy. We all need to build that genuine faith within the family of Christians, God's people.

Finally let me share two texts (or sound bites!) which I have found helpful:

1 Peter 5 v 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

James 4 v 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you.

I will give a little piece of paper with them on to each on your way out. Keep the thoughts near to hand, just to help recall God's love and compassion for us, whoever we are and in whatever 'place' we might be.

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