

26.08.01 Jacob struggles and mental health.

May I speak in the name of the living God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Following my last sermon, which offered a different perspective on the Parable of the Soils, I will attempt another 'extreme' interpretation of today's readings. I will talk about mental health.

You might rightly wonder what mental health has to do with the Bible. The Scriptures depict people grappling with mental and emotional distress. Elijah was exhausted and suicidal, David cried out in despair and anxiety, and many psalmists displayed bipolar behaviour in their hymns, passing from joy to despair and back again. Jeremiah felt hopeless and alone in his depression. And, of course, even Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In my last sermon, I already discussed other types of mental 'disorders'. Peter's impulsive responses and lack of attention could suggest ADHD, while Nicodemus's literal interpretation of Jesus's words, 'No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born', could indicate autism. Furthermore, a psychological paper has proposed that Jacob's experience of losing his son Joseph could be one of the earliest recorded cases of PTSD.

The Bible tells us about this. There must be something important for us to learn from it.

But what has mental health got to do with these readings? A college teacher from Arizona wrote, "I have often heard mental illness described as a solitary battle, fought in darkness." Has anyone else heard or said something similar in reference to mental health? Anyone? I have. When I was depressed, I couldn't see what was going on around me or what I could do.

What happens in the first reading? 'Jacob was left alone.' And then? 'A man wrestled with him until daybreak.' Until daybreak. This must have happened at night, right?

It's an odd situation, isn't it? Jacob is ninety-seven years old at this point. Physically, he can hardly be considered a challenge to any opponent, let alone a divine being — the mysterious individual whom he identifies later. This is especially apparent given how the story ends and how easily the mysterious opponent can hurt Jacob: 'He struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him.' A 'simple touch' and Jacob is left limping.

I think this fight and struggle wasn't only physical. It must be something else.

Perhaps we need to consider this encounter within the context of Jacob's narrative to understand it. Jacob devised a plan to steal his brother Esau's blessing from their father, Isaac. Esau reacted psychopathically, threatening to kill Jacob, who had to flee. It's just one

example of the many dysfunctional families found in the Bible.

Now, the day that Jacob had been dreading for twenty years has finally arrived. The last time Jacob was in Esau's presence, Esau had tried to kill him. Would Jacob survive this encounter? If I were Jacob, I wouldn't sleep a wink that night.

He is fearful and distressed. He is still planning to appease his brother. He sent him plunder worth more than many cities would give. However, as today's reading continues, it is not Jacob's plan that succeeds, but his prayer. When he later meets Esau, he discovers that Esau has had a change of heart. Esau runs to meet Jacob, embraces him and kisses him, and weeps. All of Jacob's plans and schemes have come to nothing.

So what is the significance of this encounter? Perhaps it is God's answer to Jacob's prayers. Perhaps Jacob would not have listened in any other way. This encounter brings about a deep change, reflected in a name change. When Isaac asked Jacob who he was, he replied 'Esau' in order to steal his blessing. But when asked the same question later in today's reading, he answered, "Jacob". He had changed; he didn't want to resort to any more schemes to overcome his struggles. He had previously struggled with his brother, his father, his father-in-law, and now with God. The struggle was internal and spiritual.

Eventually, Jacob denied himself, and God gave him the opportunity to become someone new: Israel.

As a result of his struggle, Jacob was left with a limp. Any illness leaves its scars. Some are visible and some are intangible. Mental illness can also leave scars. However, like Jacob's limp, they may not last forever. Ultimately, mental illness is simply suffering of the mind.

Jacob couldn't sleep that night. He was confused, fighting against something he didn't understand. It was a fight, a physical, spiritual or mental struggle that leaves scars. I remember facing depression myself and feeling very similar to Jacob. I was fighting against something I didn't understand. That struggle sapped my energy; I could hardly do anything. I struggled to sleep. I wasn't well. It was another type of encounter that helped me. I called my GP. I was sustained by prayer and my wife until the tablets kicked in. It was the same as what happened to Jacob; it changed me deeply.

I remember a parishioner in Spain telling me, "I will never be depressed because I have Jesus. I will never need antidepressants or a therapist because I have Christ in my life." While I understand what this person meant, this can be a dangerous and damaging mindset. We cannot think that depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses can only be cured with prayer. Prayer can help; as I said, it sustained me. But mental illnesses are real illnesses that require professional treatment. Jacob's struggle didn't last long and was soon resolved. If we are ever struggling

continuously and cannot cope, we should ask for help. It is neither our fault nor a sign of weak faith.

I will briefly discuss the other two readings. Paul is familiar with depression. In today's reading, he experiences "great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart". He is so anxious about what is happening to Israel that he wishes he could be cut off from Christ. How could Paul, the first to have an intimate encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, say such a thing? Perhaps Paul could no longer control his thoughts.

If someone is deeply concerned about something, telling them not to think about it is like telling someone with asthma to breathe because there is plenty of air around. It's not that they think about something and then become ill. It's the other way around: because they are ill, they cannot stop thinking about it. Sometimes we try to help by cheering them up, but that might not be the best thing to do.

At other times, we can actually help with a chat, a cup of tea or a caring conversation, but we might try to avoid the situation. Like the apostles in today's gospel reading. When a need arises within the group, they try not to take responsibility. 'Send the crowds away'. But Jesus says, 'You give them something.' YOU. We cannot replace

therapists, but there are times when we can support, rather than heal, our relatives and friends.

This reading also teaches us that we are not alone when we do this. Someone will bring two fish and five loaves. More importantly, we will always have Jesus to bring everything to him, as in this gospel.

Finally, I would like to remind you that God responded to Elijah, Jeremiah, Jacob, David, Jesus, Paul and many others during their darkest hours. He did so with compassion. If we are struggling with mental or emotional pain, God will do the same for us. The struggles experienced by Jacob and Paul in today's readings did not define them. Our own struggles do not define us either.

Remember that God is close to the broken-hearted. God sees you, God sees me, God sees us all. God is with us. And yes, God heals.

By his grace. This valley is not the end of our story.