

5th Sunday in Lent - Why I believe despitesuffering from depression by Father Stephen

First, I want to begin by saying what a splendid Lent series this has been. It's been interesting, gripping and here I am bringing up the rear. When Fr Jonathan invited me to speak on this subject I was both excited and daunted. That was because it's a means of 'coming out' about the illness that dare not speak its name – to paraphrase Oscar Wilde.

In saying that I am using and shall use 2 terms of reference or templates as I call them. The 1st is 'coming out' as gay people have done in modern times and the 2nd is drawing comparison with physical illness.

I want to tell you about a very sad case. A man in his 40s he's gone to see a psychiatrist and comes in looking very worried.

"Why are you miserable" asks the psychiatrist.

"Well, doctor, I'm useless with women; they don't want to know me".

The doctor says "what I want you to do each morning is to look in the mirror and say, I am very attractive, I'm handsome, alluring and sexy, do that for 3 weeks and come back".

Three weeks later he comes back still looking very worried "Oh no" says the psychiatrist "you seem very miserable hasn't my advice worked"?

"Oh yes" said the guy "the last 3 weeks have been the best 3 weeks of my life - the girls have been buzzing around me like bees round a honey pot. I can't fight them off"

"Well what's your problem then"?

"I don't have a problem, but my wife does"!

"Doctor Doctor I keep thinking I'm a pair of curtains" "Well pull yourself together then"

That's an old one! But I use it because in depression that's just what you can't do! But people think you can snap out of it. I'm sure that is part of the reason for the stigma that surrounds depression, Churchill's 'Black Dog'. It's like someone who's had a leg amputated being told by someone with a sprained ankle to "oh you'll get over it" It's not the same it's mostly about chemical imbalances.

In fighting the stigma, which I have chosen to do in my retirement. I feel so grateful to the Duke and duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry – for their great work in 'Heads together', and to Ruby wax for founding the Black Dog Tribe and also to Steven Fry and Justin Welby and his daughter.

Now about myself:- I am a bit odd because throughout my adult life I've had depression at 7 yearly intervals! But on each occasion it's lasted for a year and on one occasion for 2 years. I know very well the clinically agreed degrees of depression, mild – then moderate (which has been usual for me) and finally 'acute' which I endured and suffered in 2015 and which resulted in me going into hospital.

I regret though in my adult years – that I colluded with the silence that surrounded the stigma because of the 7 years I've been able to work very effectively so no one had any idea and when the black dog bite I gritted my teeth and battled on until finally I couldn't. I colluded, of course – because of career prospects – as most people do with mental health issues. And, I've seen a person who did 'come out' about her illness in a job interview for a parish and dismissed because she couldn't do the job. They wouldn't have been so dismissive had it been a physical disability.

Well I'm retired and I'm free now to fight the stigma which surrounds this illness which effects 1 in 4 of us. We've remained silent for too long!

Ok - Depression and my Faith

I saw a tweet “what people with mental illness need are large doses of the Word of God”

Really – ‘*Stupid Boy*’ – would that Christian have given that remedy for someone with cancer – well – maybe but I really don’t think it’s intended that same way. That attitude is really just a variant on ‘try harder’ ‘pull yourself together’ and adds to the sense of guilt and failure which is such a feature of depression.

In depression: the experience is that God absolutely disappears. He’s just not to be found anywhere. He’s fled the scene and vacated the premises!

However, we have got in the Christian tradition that experience of the mystic John of the Cross (16th Century Spanish Mystic) which is called the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ where God has disappeared.

And Jesus cries on the cross ‘My God - why has thou forsaken me? So Christ knew what it was to lose God completely.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta said this - that for 50 years she “felt no presence of God whatsoever”
“There is nothing but emptiness and darkness”

But there is this and I believe this strongly – yesterday was St Patricks day and in ‘St Patricks breastplate’ that ancient hymn we find these words –

‘Christ in hearts of all that love me
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger’

I believe God has been present with me through my dear family and my closest friends who have loved me and sustained me. We say we’re the body of Christ (St Paul’s great image of the Body of Christ) does that mean something or doesn’t it?

Mature

Faith should lead us into serving others in ways we can manage and are drawn to. I am an RNLI supporter. I am the Lifeboat Chaplain of the Southend Station.

I am a member of SANE – the mental health charity and a MIND champion and I want to speak out to end the stigma.

This has become my outside Christian giving,

Finally – I want to say for all of us – when we’ve lived long enough all of us carry scars. Often we want to keep those scars hidden, perhaps we try to forget about them. They are our ‘wounds’.

Christ had wounds too. And they didn’t go away. At Easter they became glorious wounds – so too with you and me. When we are beyond this life – those wounds, I think, will still be there but they will be transformed and glorified, and we shall carry them with pride.

Doctor, Doctor – I keep thinking people are ignoring me –

‘next please’...