

Coping with Illness CC 9am & 10.30 4th Nov 2012

I was talking to a group of older friends the other day and it transpired that all of them were taking tablets for one thing or another. Now that doesn't surprise us but it does make the point that illness is something that we all experience. As someone put it "A man's home may be his castle but no door can keep out sickness."

Illness affects all of us though to different extremes and for varying period of time. This morning briefly and inadequately I want to look at how we view illness and especially the illness of depression.

I do this from a standpoint of a theologian not doctor and from the standpoint of someone who has overall been blessed with good health and has not suffered from depression. I hope this morning to raise a few issues and through it give us something to act on, to talk about and to pray about.

1. Why is there illness?

The first thing we need to realise is that illness is not what God desired for us. When he made the world everything was good. However, that creation was marred by human sin, which brought with it sickness and death. As we read in Romans 5:12, "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin." As Bishop JC Ryle wrote, "There would have been no sickness if there had been no fall." (JC Ryle Sickness p6). Human sin, however we think that it came into being has spoiled the world that God made perfect. Because of sin we all will die and because of sin mortality and with it openness to illness has come into the world.

We also experience sickness because of the frailty of our human bodies. Sarah Collins in her book 'Dealing with Depression' points out, "We often think of depression or feeling low as a weakness. Indeed it certainly is about being weak, just like getting flu or cancer or a broken leg is about being weak. Because of the Fall we are all physically weak: we get ill and eventually die." (p52)

2. What should I think of illness?

If illness is universal striking young and old, rich and poor Christian and non-Christian then how should we think of it?

Should we view it as just part of life and get on with it? Should we see it as some do as a punishment for some sin we have committed? How should we view illness?

a. Not as punishment

There is no doubt that often in the Bible sickness is related to sin and for us at a very human level we see that sinful lifestyles can create illness be it alcoholism, or mental disturbance through drug misuse. However, we must not take a simplistic view and say when we are ill that we are being punished for our sins. We read clearly in Romans 8:1, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". How can there be punishment for sin now through illness if there is

“no condemnation” full and free forgiveness in Jesus? Yes your illness may have some of its roots in things that are wrong in your life but it is not a punishment. I remember some years back going up to a gig in London and when I came back to the car it had a parking ticket on it. I was amazed but I had been careless in reading the signs and I was punished. Sin is not a punishment from God for our careless living, though our careless living may give rise to our illness.

b. See some purpose

If we truly believe that God is in control of our lives and that, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,” (Romans 8:28). Then we need to see some purpose and even benefit in our illness.

I am unashamedly going to plagiarise Bishop Ryle’s booklet on sickness here and quickly give us five things to think of:

- i. sickness reminds us of death – it tells us we are mortal and we need to keep our eternal goal in mind.
- ii. sickness helps us think of God – over and again it is when illness strikes that people ask for prayer and are reminded of their need of God.
- iii. sickness helps to soften our hearts – it helps us get things into perspective. It shows us not everything can be bought and that there are things of infinitely greater value than the things we have and own.
- iv. sickness humbles us – we are not immortal, instead we are frail people in need of a God who cares for us and loves us.
- v. Sickness tests our faith – it is when we are ill that the reality of our faith can be revealed.

In this way Bishop Ryle encourages us not to see illness as a negative but to look to how God can use it in us to our benefit.

3. How should I respond to illness?

If that is the theology very briefly sketched out then what practically might we do a. when we are ill and b. when others are ill? This morning I want to focus in this section specifically on suffering from depression though much of what I have to say will relate to other aspects of illness

a. when I am ill

i. Be honest – with God with yourself and with others. The Bible and especially the Psalms have lots of examples of those who we could say were depressed. In Psalm 42 The Psalmist describes himself as drowning, “Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me” (42:7) and he was perplexed asking “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” (42:11) and in Psalm 88:18 he describes how “the darkness is my closest

friend". We can talk to God about how we feel. We don't have to put on a show to him. We can ask him "why do I feel like this?"

Be honest with yourself. That is don't put unnecessary expectations on yourself because you think "I shouldn't feel like this". It is when we accept we are ill that we begin to look for help.

Be honest with others. Don't pretend you are on top when you are actually drowning. Obviously we can't open our hearts and lives to everyone but if we pretend we are well we cannot then complain if others don't respond properly to us. We all know that we do this. Someone asks "how are you" and we say "fine". Well fine means Feeling In Need of Encouragement. Be honest if you are feeling down or depressed.

ii. Be with God – that is make time as best you can to pray and read the Bible. I understand that at times God may seem a long way off, the psalmist knew that experience, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer" (Ps 22:1-2) But we need if we can to keep our communication with God going when we are ill be it through prayers we read or just a few moments of prayer as we are able. We need to hear from God's word be it as we read a bit, perhaps from the Psalms or get someone else to read it for us, or listen to a sermon download or some Christian music.

iii. Be with others – that is make use of Christian fellowship. I recognise the church is not perfect but we are called to, "Carry each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and God has put us in a Christian family for a purpose that we might help each other in times of need.

iv. Be helped – there are I understand practical things we can do help ourselves, like eating properly, resting, getting fresh air, being with people and so on. Then of course there is professional help we can turn to in terms of doctors and a variety of anti-depressant drugs but also things like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which helps to give us tools to cope with our circumstances and feelings.

Friends I understand that all this is easy for me to say because this is not my problem. I also realise that for many it is hard to say they are suffering from depression because they perceive there is a stigma attached to it and people worry what others will think about them. If there is a stigma then it is only as seemingly capable and together people admit they have had or have depression that the stigma will be removed. Also, as I said, in the first of this series when we looked at self-image what matters is not how others view us or even how we view ourselves but how God views us.

b. when others are ill

How might we respond when others are ill, when my friend is depressed? Well it is about friendship isn't it? I remember back in 2008 we did a series on friendship and in one we saw how Jonathan

came to David in the wilderness and “helped him find strength in God” (1 Sam 23:16) which could be understood as “he put David’s hand as it were into God’s hand.”

He did that by making the effort to keep in touch with David even though it could not have been convenient. If we have friends who are having a bad time especially with depression then we should keep in touch with them be it by phone text email and don’t be surprised if they don’t respond. We also need to be sensitive and read between the lines and if they ask a vague question about what are you doing today it may well mean I’m feeling dreadful and need some company. Jonathan was a friend who made the time and effort to be with David.

He also reminded David of God’s promises. He reminded David that God had promised he would be King and for us we can help our friends not by telling them to have faith and trust in God but reminding them of how great is our God and how faithful he is.

Then of course we can help our friends find strength in God through prayer and we need to be faithful in our prayer support for those who are ill.

What our friends who are ill need is the quiet support of a faithful friend who will listen to them without judging them, without feeling you have to offer advice and who will help them find strength in God.

Friends this has been pretty brief and inadequate but hopefully it has given us some things to think and pray about. Illness strikes most people if not everyone at some time and depression probably about one in four so if that is you then you are not alone and of course in the illness none of us is alone because God is with us. We may not understand what is happening to us or why but God is with us and for us and it is in him we can trust and in him we can find strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.