



## **Vicar's Letter August 2020**

Dear Friends,

### **Talking About Mental Health**

It is estimated that one in four people will face mental health issues during their lifetime, and it is likely that this figure will increase significantly as a result of coronavirus.

Peter Rooney, chief operating officer for NHS North Cumbria Clinical Commissioning Group, has warned that many people across Cumbria would face "significant psychological stress," as a result of the outbreak and lockdown. Bereavement, social isolation, a prolonged period of anxiety, and the economic impact of the virus, will have a significant impact on the mental health of many people.

As a church it is important we have open and frank conversations about mental health and that we are a safe place where people can admit they are struggling. This is because I know there are people in our church who struggle with mental health problems and I am one of them.

One of the things that often stops people talking about their mental health issues is fear about how people will respond. Sadly there is still a stigma that surrounds mental health, but it is important we can talk about this, which prompted me to write this letter.

Although I have tried to deny it, I have recently come to recognise that one of the issues I struggle with is anxiety. On reflection it is something I have probably lived with for much of my life, but I am quite good at hiding it. However a few weeks ago, as lockdown restrictions started to be eased, I realised my anxiety was starting to take over. It is a feeling of physical tension in the body, or drowning, or being completely overwhelmed and not wanting to carry on, and it is only when the anxiety lifts that suddenly I feel I can breathe again, as if a huge weight has been taken off.

It is important for me to write this, because I want people to realise there is no shame in having mental health issues. Nor is it a sign of lacking faith, in fact when my anxiety is at its worse, I would be completely lost if it were not for my faith in Jesus, although in these times I need to remind myself of the promises of Jesus and to fix my eyes on him, rather than the things I am anxious about.

A reading of scripture also reveals that some of the great heroes of faith struggled, for example in Numbers 11, Moses cried out to God "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me." (Numbers 11: 14-15) Things became too much for Moses that it came to the point where he despaired of life itself and didn't want to carry on.

The renowned Pauline scholar, the Right Revd Professor Tom Wright believes that St. Paul suffered a full blown nervous breakdown, when he writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 8, 'We [Paul and Timothy] do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that *we despaired of life itself.*'

Then there is the example of David Watson, evangelist, author and vicar of St. Michael le Belfry in York, who had a hugely influential ministry that impacted thousands of people until his death in 1984 from cancer, yet he wrestled with depression. More recently the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby admitted on BBC Radio 4's Thought For The Day, that he has sought help for depression, and is now taking anti-depressants. He said "I have a daughter who has been very open about her experiences of depression, and she helped me see that it wasn't something to be ashamed of. It's just life – and I got help."

How should we respond to the issues caused by mental health? Firstly, it is important to be able to admit when we are struggling, pretending things are okay when they are not only makes things worse. Secondly, talking with others about our struggles can help immensely. What most people need is not advice, but someone who is prepared to listen with empathy and without judgement. Thirdly, prayer support is invaluable, knowing others are praying for you especially if you are finding prayer difficult, makes such a difference.

There are also practical steps that we can take to help improve our mental health. Eating well, taking exercise, getting plenty of rest (including time off), can make a huge difference. The NHS also has a helpful website about looking after your mental health, the link is [nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters). If you need additional support please speak to your doctor.

I recently attended a mental health webinar organised by the diocese, and led by Graham Fawcett, Director of Psychosocial Services of Thrive Worldwide. He said that 30% of people who are depressed or anxious will improve in 6 months – but others need additional support. One of the organisations offering support is 'First Step' ([cmtw.nhs.uk/services/first-step](https://cmtw.nhs.uk/services/first-step)), which you can refer yourself to, and which provides free talking therapies to adults (18+) in North Cumbria. The good news, is that the vast majority of people who access these services do get better.

Finally, do visit [mindandsoulfoundation.org](https://www.mindandsoulfoundation.org), this is a Christian organisation that has a lot of helpful resources and articles on the theme of emotional and mental wellbeing, written from a Christian perspective.

## **Listening Service**

As mentioned in last month's newsletter, we are exploring the possibility of establishing a listening service for the benefit of those within church and the wider community. If this is something you are interested in being involved in, please speak to myself or Joanne Daly.

## **Pastoral Support**

Pastoral support is always important, but especially during the last four months. I would like to thank the many people in church who have been phoning and supporting one another during this time, and apologise to anyone who feels that they haven't had the contact or support that they would have expected.

Paul reminds us that we are the body of Christ, and that 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.' (1 Corinthians 12:26) Can I therefore please encourage you to continue to do all you can to support one another, through phone calls and visits (where it is safe to do so) and practical support, especially anyone who might be living on their own, or is particularly vulnerable?

If there are any particular pastoral care issues that you are aware of, please do let either myself, Nina ([nina@stjamescarlisle.org.uk](mailto:nina@stjamescarlisle.org.uk)) or Toby ([toby@stjamescarlisle.org.uk](mailto:toby@stjamescarlisle.org.uk) or tel. 810616) know about it.

## **Church Services and Events in the Autumn**

At the start of the pandemic, I had hoped and assumed that by the autumn most church activities and events would be able to resume, however it is becoming increasingly apparent that this is unlikely to happen. We have to accept that a second or third wave of the virus is possible, and that we will be living with the impact of coronavirus for a long time to come.

The PCC had planned to meet in July to start discussing the way forward, but have decided to postpone this meeting until the early autumn, by which time we will have had time to assess how the services are running.

Although these are extremely challenging times, I believe God is opening up to us new ways to explore being and doing church, and serving our community.

I believe one of our greatest priorities as a church must be to pray, and discern what God wants for his church, can I therefore invite you to prayerfully consider the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the church?
- Where do we want to be in 10 years time?
- What do you sense God is saying to us as a church?

## **Nina & family**

Nina and her family, Nigel, Daniel, Ella and Henri will be moving to Carlisle on the 10th August. Their new address will be St. Luke's Vicarage, Brownrigg Drive, Carlisle, CA2 6PA.

God bless

Simon