

Sermon – Sunday 20th August 2023

Earlier this week I read an article entitled, “The psychological immune system: four ways to bolster yours – and have a happier, calmer life.” It’s not the snappiest title, but it always fascinates me when articles claim to provide ways to make our lives better – in this instance happier and calmer. Often I find myself wondering whether there will be any mention of faith in the quest for a better life. It may not surprise you to hear that usually there isn’t.

Nevertheless, on this occasion the article got me thinking. Because as I read through the four ways that were identified to bolster my psychological immune system, I realised that the Christian faith actually does have something to say about each one of them.

I should perhaps provide just a little context to the article. The psychological immune system doesn’t actually exist per se. Those who write about it are using the analogy of the body’s immune system which can protect us from illnesses and suggesting that we can in some ways train our brains into processes which are beneficial for our mental health. In this particular article, the four ways identified to bolster our psychological immune system were:

1. Moving from negative to neutral. Apparently our brains have a negativity bias, meaning that we can tend to look on the gloomier side. The suggestion is that instead of trying to force ourselves into a false positivity, we find a neutral zone to prevent the plunge into negativity.
2. Access the present moment.
3. Find your meaning.
4. Practise acceptance.

I want to try to explain how and why I think that our faith has something to say about each of these four suggestions.

Starting with the first, the Christian message of hope is surely the antithesis of negativity. I would also suggest that it’s the antithesis of the kind of false positivity that can be damaging to our mental health. This is where we try to convince ourselves that everything is fine when actually that isn’t how we feel. Every year on Good Friday we recognise that there is tragedy and horror in life and we in no way try to minimise it. And yet we are also Easter people. We believe in the power of love to overcome hatred and the power of life to overcome death. That doesn’t mean that we don’t experience pain; and neither does it mean that there aren’t times in this world when evil appears to triumph. Our faith, though, reminds us that ultimately love and life are stronger.

In a sense this links with accessing the present moment. The practice of mindfulness has become increasingly popular in recent years, presumably because we recognise its benefits for our mental health. Christian mindfulness has been around for over 2000 years, reminding us to live in the here and now, rather than looking too far into a future which is unknown and we cannot control. Just think of Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’ Arguably, the practice of focusing on the present moment can help us to avoid slipping into negative thoughts about the future.

Perhaps it is the third of these suggestions that the Christian faith has the most to say about: finding your meaning. Really our faith is all about finding meaning in our lives. In the various stories in the scriptures, we encounter the human search for meaning, and are invited to be a part of that quest.

We recognise our place as created beings, not the creator. At the heart of the Christian story is the belief that our lives are a gift to us from God; that we were made to live in relationship with God, and in relationship with one another. And that we were made as an act of love, and are therefore called to love others. How each one of us identifies meaning more precisely will be different. But there is no doubt that a key focus of faith is meaning.

The final suggestion in the article is about practising acceptance. Really what it talks about is something that our faith also teaches. That there are things that are outside of our control. It's not a particularly popular reality in a society that wants to be convinced that we get what we deserve and that we have infinite choices to be and do whatever we want. Of course there are good and positive reasons to work hard; to have ambition; to aspire. But none of these will guarantee the success we might hope for. None of these will guarantee that there won't be hardship in our lives. The Christian story sure speaks into this reality.

So why, you might be wondering, does any of this matter? And what has it got to do with this morning's gospel reading?

In response to why it matters, my hope is simply to remind us that the Christian faith is as relevant to today's society as it ever has been to any society. In the twenty-first century we are more aware than ever of mental health and wellbeing. Perhaps that's because in the western world we are largely freed from some of the more immediate concerns for our physical safety. But whatever the reason, we do need to remember that God's love for God's creation extends to our mental as well as our physical health.

I wonder how many people would believe that Christian faith can be good for our mental health. I wonder how many people would read an article about psychological wellbeing and expect to find faith mentioned. And I wonder how much we make those links for ourselves.

I do think, though, that there is something missing. And that is what brings us back to the gospel reading. It's a challenging story. The Canaanite woman approaches Jesus, and he appears to dismiss her. Why is that? Is he trying to show his disciples something? Is he even trying to shock them? Or is he reminding us all of the importance of changing our mind when we discover that we are in the wrong?

Whatever the reasoning, the Canaanite woman knows something that the article about our psychological immune system cannot bring itself to acknowledge. The article says this: "If we can strengthen our psychological immune system, there might be ways that we can better rely on ourselves in times of difficulty." And that's where the Christian faith has something far more important to say. That life isn't all about relying on ourselves. That doesn't mean we don't take responsibility for our actions. But it does mean that we believe that we are held in a love that is bigger than our own capabilities.

That's what the Canaanite woman knew. Listen to her words. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." And: "Lord, help me."

There is good news in the practice of our faith for our mental wellbeing. And there is something far more important, too. And that is the knowledge that we are loved. That when we discover that there

are circumstances beyond our control, we are still loved. That when we experience pain and anguish, we are still loved. And what is asked of us is to share that love with others.

Amen