

## *Was Jesus Mentally Healthy?*

Several years ago, I wore a monitor for several that kept track of my blood pressure. So I could see what might cause fluctuations in blood pressure. And the only discernible cause of my heightened blood pressure was ... watching the news. Every time I tried to update myself about what is happening in the real world, blood pressure rockets. Turns out, ignorance is good for you!

This is often the logic behind some forms of Christian worship, where you put your fingers in your ears and sing Hallelujahs. And behind some of the forms of dominant individualist therapy models, based on ignoring everything that is happening in the real world.

And so, the question through this term, is whether - given the reality of the world we inhabit - it is mentally healthy to enjoy mental health. Because all too often, mental health, like Christian worship, serves as an anaesthetic against all that nasty stuff that is happening in the real world.

In the Bible, many of the central figures would fail any modern mental-health checklist. Noah survives a total civilisational collapse, witnesses a holocaust, and becomes alcoholic. Abraham lives under chronic instability: commanded to leave land, kin, and future security, he exists in permanent moral tension, capable of astonishing hospitality one moment and ethically compromised decisions the next. David is even less tidy: a combatant formed by violence, and blatantly living with all the symptoms of combat trauma.

So, when we come to Jesus, he is not the exception, but the culmination: a figure of clarity rather than comfort, whose anguish is never removed, whose task is never softened, and whose strength consists not in emotional equilibrium but in remaining present,

truthful, and responsible in a world that is anything but sane. When you look at the task in front of Jesus, how could he possibly have remained mentally healthy in modern terms?

So, that is the reading we had from Luke: the so called Nazareth Manifesto. Jesus reads out, pretty selectively, from a messianic scroll. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." And then he lists the tasks that lie before him, and it means announcing good news to the wrong people.

We often call what Jesus does in Nazareth a sermon. That is a terrible translation.

A sermon suggests moralistic or pious monologue, based on iron age mythologies, and delivered by those with over-inflated egos convinced they are speaking the will of God. What Jesus does here, is closer to a White House Press briefing. It is normally issued from a seat of power – a declaration of policy, a public announcement of how things are going to be from here on in!

The difference is that Jesus delivers it **without any power at all**. No army. No office. No protection. No ability to enforce what he announces. He stands up in his hometown synagogue and effectively says: *this is the agenda; this is who it's for; this is how it will work*. And then he sits down and waits.

And it guarantees that he will alienate everyone – just in different ways.

To some in that synagogue, Jesus will sound like a dangerous rebel. He is talking about liberation, debt release, freedom for the oppressed, and he is doing it in a region already notorious for unrest. This is the land of milk and honey – or it should be – except the milk and honey are taxed from beneath their feet and funnelled into foreign purses and foreign banquets. In that context, talk of liberation sounds like the sort

of thing that gets villages burned and people crucified. From this angle, Jesus looks reckless. Someone who will bring Rome down on their heads.

But to others, Jesus sounds like something worse: a collaborator. Because he deliberately refuses the language of vengeance. He cuts the text short before divine payback. He does not encourage violent revolt. He does not name enemies to be destroyed. In this sense, he deliberately edits the Bible Reading he is giving. He speaks of freedom without calling for blood. For those whose lives have been shaped by humiliation, this sounds like betrayal. If you are going to announce liberation, surely you need the satisfaction of exacting vengeance on your oppressor!

So Jesus stands between two incompatible expectations. Too radical for the cautious. Too cautious for the radical. Too dangerous for the collaborators. Too compromised for the revolutionaries.

This is not poor communication. It is the cost of telling the truth in a world structured by domination.

How, with the task before him, can Jesus maintain his own mental health. He cannot!

There is no version of this task that does not generate hostility, misunderstanding, and pressure from all sides.

Given the impossibility of the task in front of him, what does he do? Download some forms from a website, and submit an application to God for some adjustments to his Mission? I mean - you couldn't blame him for thinking, no - this is bad for my mental and physical health. In fact, he does precisely that in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." In other words, 'I would prefer not to.' And yet, straight away, he snaps himself back to attention. "Yet not my will, but yours be done."

So - what does he do? The reason I was hoping I would have a military padre speak this week, is that today's military, takes mental health very seriously. Not in the sense, that they seek to remove obstacles and difficulties from military personnel. You cannot really do that in the real world, when you have a mission to complete. Nor is the enemy going to grant you special allowances. (Well, unless that enemy 10<sup>th</sup> Century Anglo Saxon Ealderman, Brithnoth.)

But instead, today's British military encourage, and equip, and support personnel with mental health difficulties to face the obstacles they have to face. And today, the military do this very, very well.

And this, after all, is what Jesus did. Part of Jesus' own mission was therapy in the original Greek, the word that we often use for healing.

And in the case of Jesus himself, he engaged frequently in withdrawal - in a form of what today we might loosely call mindfulness. He would go up a mountainside to get space, to be alone, to pray. But this was not simply to live a life of perpetual withdrawal from the real world, but to enable him to face that real world, to face the mission for which he was sent. And to pray, in these circumstances, was not to offer a mythical god a wish-list of things he would like to be supernaturally arranged. To pray, in these circumstances, is to stop, to listen, to pay attention to the world, and your god-given place within it, and then to align who you really are, with who you are called to be.

We don't know precisely how Jesus engaged in what today we call prayer. The nearest we come today, is the Lord's Prayer. This is not a shopping list of stuff we would like God to do for people. It is rather, a reorientation of who we are in relation to God and to the world, followed by a plea that God will provide his people with the stuff they need, to be who

they need to be, and to do what they need to do. That is the Lord's Prayer.

But can you pray that prayer and keep your mental health intact?

Can you have a purpose like the purpose Jesus revealed in his Nazareth Manifesto, and keep your mental health intact?

Throughout the Gospels, you very rarely see a trace of happiness in Jesus. He was not a figure who maintained an air of serenity and blessedness. He was angry, rude, insulting, and ready to find offence.

But he would not follow the crowd. He would not become well adjusted to injustice, and well adapted to indifference. He was a prophet, and felt the pain of a prophet, and the plight of the oppressed. How can you do that and be deemed mentally healthy by modern standards? His anxiety spilt out as drops of blood through the pores of his skin. You cannot accuse Jesus of being mentally healthy.

When you draw onto yourself the plight of the outcast, of the outsider, of the marginalised, and above all - those whose poverty bring with it all of those things, then you draw onto yourself the mental horrors that people face. Jesus of Nazareth did that willingly.

But that is only half the story. ` Jesus says, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.*"

He is naming an **otherness** that interrupts the closed loop of the self.

What sustains Jesus is not inner calm, not resilience techniques, not positive thinking. It is an orientation beyond himself - a life drawn into relationship: with God, with those who suffer, with a truth that does not belong to him and cannot be managed by him.

Jesus draws from a source that is not identical with his own wellbeing. Something that resists collapse into the present moment. Something that does not promise comfort, but gives him the capacity to remain faithful to what he has seen and heard.

By modern standards, Jesus was not mentally healthy. He is anxious, distressed, unprotected, and repeatedly overwhelmed. He does not appear happy. He does not appear balanced. He does not appear safe.

But by a more demanding standard, the ability to remain truthful, present, and answerable to others in a brutal world, Jesus is not unwell. He is **alive to reality**.

## INTERCESSION

Let us hold before us the world as it is, not as we wish it were.

We bring the weight of a planet under strain:  
lands stripped for profit, waters warming, species  
disappearing without ceremony.

Give us the courage to stay attentive,  
and the will to change habits that cost others their  
future.

We hold before us economies that demand endless growth  
while people live one shock away from collapse.  
For those crushed by debt, insecure work, rising  
rents, and quiet shame,  
may there be justice that is more than words,  
and solidarity that is more than sympathy.

We remember places shaped by war, threat, and fear—  
where violence is not a headline but a daily  
calculation.

For those who bear responsibility without safety,  
and those whose lives are treated as expendable,  
may restraint overcome vengeance,  
and courage resist the lure of cruelty.

We pray for those who feel overwhelmed, angry, numb,  
or exhausted—

not because they are weak,  
but because they are paying attention.  
May they not be abandoned to carry this alone.

And for ourselves:

when withdrawal feels easier than responsibility,  
when comfort tempts us to look away,  
draw us into the strength that comes from encounter—  
from listening to others, from shared labour,  
from truth that interrupts us.

Give us what we need to remain present,  
to act without illusion, and to keep faith with one  
another  
in a world that does not make this easy. Amen.

## First Reading

### Luke 4

<sup>16</sup> When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,

<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

## Second Reading

Luke 22

### **Jesus Prays on the Mount of Olives**

<sup>39</sup> He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. <sup>40</sup> When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial. <sup>41</sup> Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, <sup>42</sup> 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' <sup>43</sup> Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. <sup>44</sup> In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. <sup>45</sup> When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'