

Growing Roots

Spirituality and Prayer in Suffolk

Welcome to the seventh e-newsletter on prayer and spirituality in Suffolk. This time we are exploring ways in which our spiritual life and our prayer are affected **when times are difficult**.

In difficult times, sometimes our prayer strengthens us and our whole spiritual life encourages us in finding a way to live well in the midst of our circumstances. At other times we can feel as if all that previously helped us draw close to God lets us down when we most need it. These challenges are not new. Many psalms express frustrations with God and in later centuries St John of the Cross described the Dark Night of the Soul.

In this issue four people generously share from their experiences of depression (pages 2-3), a child's illness (page 4), developing deafness (page 5), and of surgery and life-threatening illness (pages 6-7). Of course everyone's experience of difficult times is unique and we respond to them in different ways. But these stories show the value of other people – their prayer and their friendship – and the value of knowing the Bible, Christian tradition and specific prayers, drawing on them now because they are found to fit the circumstances.

I hope you will continue to explore prayer wherever you are. One opportunity of deepening our experience of prayer is at the Exploring Prayer day at St Edmundsbury Cathedral on Saturday 18 July (page 8). Bookings are being taken now.

If this e-newsletter was passed on to you and you want to receive it directly please contact me, Anne Spalding, Spirituality Advisor, on anne.spalding@cofesuffolk.org or 01394 610065.



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When times are difficult

Depression, with faith, hope and love

Martin Roberts has suffered several bouts of depression, 'resorting' both to medication and talking therapies. Like a fellow sufferer Henri Nouwen, Martin reflects on faith, hope and love:

***Faith** is important to me. It comes in two main flavours, mine and God's. Mine is based on a realisation that I needed (and need) something outside of myself if I was ever going to cope with life. Increasingly I have been made aware that God has faith in me and I know you also. He sent Jesus to recapture a close relationship with us, but Jesus ascended, leaving mere humans, empowered by the Holy Spirit to see his work through to completion. He trusts us to carry out his work. He has faith in us.*



When I first was diagnosed with depression I was staggered at how quickly the doctor diagnosed it and the previous bouts I had had now made sense. It is an illness; I was not to blame. Taking medication caused me lots of anguish. In the end I came to see that medication is one of the tools that help me. Without them I just continue to slide downward. The behaviours that dominate the depression – the anger, the lack of patience, the total lack of care for others' feelings and, for me, the heightened libido (others say theirs was reduced to nothing) – just got worse without medication. The pills gave me the space to become better.

Sadly one of the side effects of depression for me was that facing churches full of people singing praise was just too much to bear. The other main side effect was that my faith seemed to vanish. I discovered after a 2½ year spell on one drug that my faith returned quickly when I stopped it. My last spell on drugs was different because I mentioned to the doctor that I would not take pills as my faith was affected. He fortunately took this very seriously and gave me something else that did not have this effect.

***Hope** is in short measure during depression. I commute from Suffolk to London each day. I had to take a timeout when the feelings of hopelessness began to involve trains. I say this not because I really thought I would harm myself, but because the thoughts of suicide seemed very real and I wanted them to stop.*

Getting treatment for depression is sadly linked to the levels of harm that you might do to yourself. You can feel very low, yet still not think that you would carry out the ultimate act. This may prevent you from receiving the help you need. The fact that there is help out there but seemingly not available adds to a feeling of hopelessness.

Depression seems like a long road. It is no good kidding oneself that things will be better in the morning when you have that feeling of dread about the next day. Strangely facing up to the fact that one is in for a long haul does give you hope. It may also help those around you to come to terms with the reality that quick fixes just won't work.

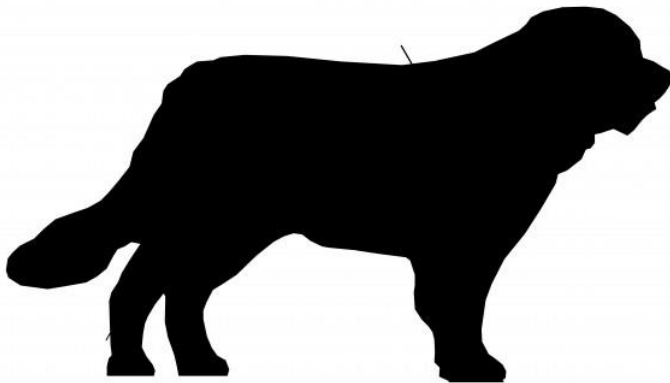
I remember being very grateful for our dog. Without the need to walk her several times a day I am not sure that I would have got out at all. Exercise is supposed to help improve things. I am not sure a slow plod alongside the river counts as exercise, but it gave me a view outside of myself, which eventually saw me through. As I began to come out of the greyness, it was these walks that enabled me to think. They enabled me to begin to ponder and some of these ponderings were God-wards, bringing a true measure of hope.

Love: *Depression seems to rob you of the space to love. It seems to take all your energy just to live, so loving seems out of the question. The consequences of this for those who share living space with someone with depression should not be underestimated. When expressions of love and joy are spurned continuously it is almost impossible to keep showing love. Relationships are put under immense strain. As humans we thrive on expressions of love. We grow when we are loved and diminish when spurned. One of the sadnesses of depression is the way it robs life of love.*

If you are in such an experience, being told that God, the ultimate lover, still loves you, can just add to the burden of feeling a failure. How can I be depressed when God still loves me? I found that during depression I was deep down challenging God to come and finally show me His love. My walk with God is a continual wobble between doubt and faith underpinned by a longing for certainty.

God is Love. When you love someone, you are expressing God to them. You can't love without God. When you come alongside someone who is in the depths and you show compassion and give them time to simply pour out their interminable woes, you are showing a love that comes from

God. You may not get anything back, in fact they may test you as they are testing God also. Nevertheless this very act may be the one thing that brings light into that person's life when all around them is pure darkness. My knowledge of God's love comes from others who have journeyed through these dark times with me and are still there when I have come out the other side. There is no shame if you failed to see the whole journey through with someone. Sometimes it needs more than one person can offer.



I want to finish by saying something of what depression gives a person because it may become the most important episode in their lives. We have to accept that we will not always cope with what life throws at us. Yet I believe that that in itself is a strength. The

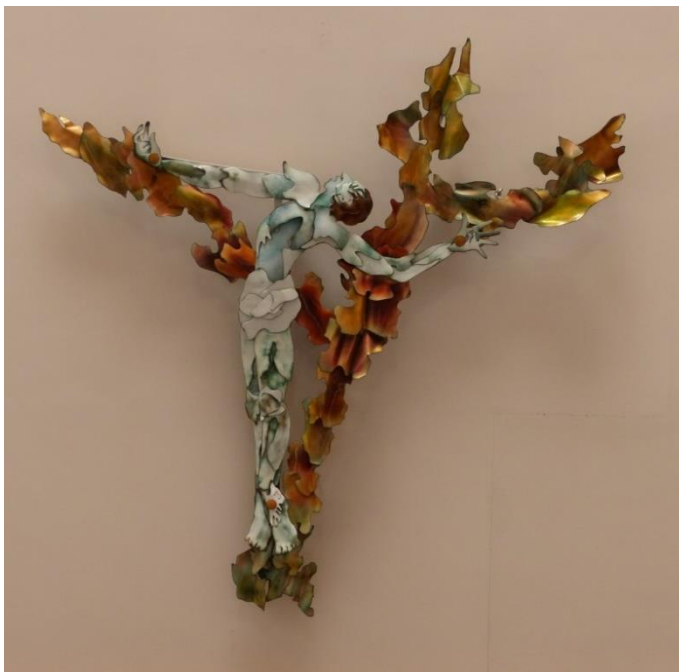
Bible talks about strength out of weakness. Not knowing one's weakness somehow robs you of knowing true strength, God's strength. When you fail to cope yet again and perhaps you feel you let others down, maybe it is time to acknowledge that you can't do all things. We are placed in the community of the church for a reason. I think this is as mutual support for one another. I need to rely on others as others need to rely on me and as we do this and share one another's burdens we might find that the taking of Christ's yoke is indeed easy as He promised.

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Words Failed Me

When Julia Lincoln's child was in hospital, she found she was speechless:

Over the course of many decades of Christian exploration and the random trials of life, my inspirations have often come from people, communities and prayer. When my oldest child was a patient on a paediatric oncology ward for nearly a year, I was surprised to find that I could not pray at all. The lovely Hospital Chaplain was not a comfort but just another time-consuming professional.



Many wonderful people were praying for us, which sustained and carried us. The experience was such an emotional extreme that words literally failed me. Two strands of thought carried me through. One was the vision of the crucified Christ; that God in a vulnerable, powerless and agonised state was there in all that was happening. It is a mystery that though Jesus suffered for humanity, we can only be transformed when we engage with him in our woundedness. It is when I am powerless, not powerful, that I find Jesus. Ideas from Julian of Norwich, who spent 20 years considering the cross, surfaced in my thoughts from retreats years earlier.

The second strand came from another past prayer journey using Ignatius' ideas – to choose those things that could lead to life (Deuteronomy 30: 15, 19-20). I tried explaining this to one of the doctors, but I don't think he got it. In most days there are choices to be made: on that ward there were times when I just had to set my will to do what was required to bring the best outcome, irrespective of what might happen.

Though I wouldn't say I enjoyed being in a difficult place it did 'produce perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope' (Romans 5: 3-5) because Christ first led the way in love.



This sums up how Julia often feels about her family's situation

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Finding my way to God's peace

Jean Maxwell describes her experience of becoming deaf:

God is the master of 'co-incidences'. He puts up with my grumbling and dependence on arrow prayers, and on the prayers of others, when times are tough. But he always leads me back to a place of peace. When I finally and consciously express the panic, grumbling, whatever... in prayer, and sometimes through letting others in as well to support, I find peace and answers come.

I am deaf, increasingly so since my forties. Phone conversations became difficult, and I was struggling in meetings. As many will understand, deafness is incredibly isolating, as the simple things in life – conversation, humour, the sound of the wind – become inaccessible.

I can remember feeling distraught at having to take retirement. I talked to friends at a Lee Abbey conference. Then, visiting Scargill House six months later with the same friends for support, I heard I had been granted medical retirement. Peace came with a place – Scargill – and people.



Jean's hearing dog, Selva

One friend asked me to write an article for a Christian magazine. Almost as soon as it was published I had an e-mail from a cochlear implant team suggesting I sent my audiogram. Over the next few months I had various referrals, tests and scans. The day I went for the results I was given the unexpected news of a neuroma, a very small benign tumour on the hearing nerve, meaning a cochlear implant was likely to be contraindicated. But within an hour (spent texting for prayer), I was seen by a newly-appointed consultant with a particular interest in both implants and neuromas. Eventually new research led to my having an implant. God's timing is perfect.

Four years on, my speech recognition tests are excellent. But what is so special is hearing birds singing, the wind in the trees, the sounds of God's creation.

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'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22)

Sylvia Chapman describes her experience through surgery and illness:

In intensive care following major spinal surgery and sending a text to my husband telling him I wanted to throw the towel in, I wanted to die. Such was the desolation, pain and feeling so ill. Where WAS God? Why couldn't I pray?

But the gentle smile of my intensive care nurse as she bathed my feet reminded me of someone else who washed tired feet.

Less than a year later, cancer paid a visitation. Do not let people fool you. Chemo mashes your body, mind and spirit. I did not even know who I was, let alone pray. A major operation took away a lot of my insides and left me scarred for life; every time I look at my body – I am reminded. For three whole days I vomited almost non-stop. My rings dropped off my fingers; such was the sudden weight loss. 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint... my mouth is dried up like a potsherd' (Psalm 22 again). I knew deeply what 'wretched' means.



Then God spoke quite clearly to me through the wretchedness. 'What do you want me to do for you?' 'To be able to eat' I replied.

Pleshey House of Retreat votive stand, where the Warden lit a candle for me throughout my illnesses

The next day an angel in the form of my McMillan nurse suggested we froze Mars bars and cut them into slices that I could suck. She felt sure the sugar rush and the flavour would awaken my wish to eat. It certainly did. She rang every day encouraging me on. The staff at St Elizabeth's Day Care Centre did the rest of the work. Acceptance of my pain, in body, mind and spirit. Massage of my feet and hands, weekly Eucharist. Pain control, writing my 'end of life' documents. This is how I found God and prayer – through the ministrations of others.

One year on – another major operation – the gift of a new hip, by a superb surgeon, has enabled me to put my mobility scooter up for sale and to walk again. It was Ash Wednesday and the hospital chaplain signed me with the sign of the cross with ash. What a witness for the rest of the ward – the black mark upon my head!

God does not 'forsake' us, even if it feels like that. He is there through the others who pray FOR us. The cards, flowers and gifts remind us of His comfort. The visitors who hang on in there with you, moving at your pace, not theirs. The priest colleague who gave me a scripture passage from Isaiah, that God had given her as she was praying for me. 'I have chosen you and not cast you off, I will help you.'

Most of all your loved ones, young and old – who keep loving you and encouraging you, even through their worry for you.

Prayer after Psalm 143 (*Common Worship: Daily prayer, page 867*):

*Jesus, our companion,
when we are driven to despair,
help us through the friends and strangers
we encounter on our path,
to know you as our refuge,
our way, our truth and our life.*



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Exploring Prayer

Saturday 18 July 2015, 10.00am - 4.00pm
St Edmundsbury Cathedral



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A time to try out prayer in different ways

Book your place and choose your workshops in advance via Jayne Whiteman:
deanspa@stedscathedral.org | 01284 748722

Details and Booking form at

http://www.cofesuffolk.org/assets/downloads/life_faith/Spirituality/Exploring%20Prayer%20leaflet%20final.pdf

Reminders

Retreat Days

To explore prayer and spirituality with others or on one's own (see *Growing Roots 6*):

<http://www.cofesuffolk.org/index.cfm?page=landf.content&cmid=354>

Resources

For suggested reading and links to websites:

<http://www.cofesuffolk.org/index.cfm?page=landf.content&cmid=355>

Spiritual Direction/ Accompaniment:

For people who can walk with us, or to offer to walk with others (see *Growing Roots 3*):

<http://www.cofesuffolk.org/index.cfm?page=landf.content&cmid=299>