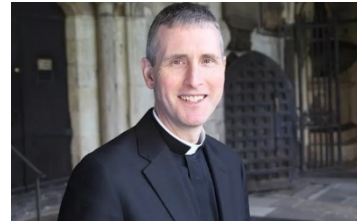




Illness: a Christian reflection

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If one of our friends told us that she was praying to God to make her ill, we might think she was joking. If she wasn't joking, we might think she needed counselling.

In the 14th century, in Norwich, a young woman prayed for a physical illness that would take her to the point of death, and her prayer was granted a few years later.

Religious people have always done things that seem strange and extreme, but what is interesting about this young woman was her *reason* for wanting to be ill. It wasn't because she hated herself. It wasn't because she wanted to die. She wanted to be ill because she wanted to understand more about love.

Most of us find illness frightening and we avoid it as much as we can. Hospitals are terrifying places for a lot of people, and we rightly admire those who work in them. But physical or mental illness is a fact of life for many, many people.

Most of us are really bad at being ill. Perhaps I should just speak for myself! It is hard not to close in on yourself when you are in pain. If you are used to being healthy and independent, having to depend on other people can be really difficult.

Illness is the clearest reminder to us that we cannot always be strong. Any of us can become ill. It's just part of being human. We are, of course, right to do everything we can to find new treatments and cures for disease, but we will never be immune from being weak sometimes (even a lot of the time), physically or mentally.

I once worked in a school for young people with complex physical and learning disabilities. Life was hard for those students, but the way they coped with their weaknesses, and being so dependent on other people (often with great humour and dignity) was inspirational. The longer I worked there, the more I realised that I was a student too. I was learning all kinds of lessons about how to be a proper human being with weaknesses as well as strengths.

Coming back to that young woman from Norwich, I'm still not sure it's a good idea to pray to be made ill, but she realised that there are things we can learn from being weak. Being a Christian, she was

encouraged to think about how Jesus became weak and suffered, in the events we remember in the week leading up to Easter (Holy Week). She was taught that the reason Jesus became weak and suffered was, at the most basic level, because of love – his love for us – and that his love shows us God’s love.

By becoming ill, by becoming weak, that young woman (known as ‘Julian of Norwich’) believed she could get closer to understanding the love of God in Jesus, and went on to write one of the greatest pieces of English spiritual writing; ‘Revelations of Divine Love’.

Illness is never a good thing, but perhaps it is something we can learn from. Perhaps, through weakness, even illness, we can all learn something about love?

Suggested Bible passages

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Romans 8:22-26

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1:20a-29

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

James 5:13-16

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:3-9

Prayer

Watch Thou, o Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or weep tonight, and give Thine angels charge over those who sleep. Tend Thy sick ones, O Lord Christ; rest Thy weary ones; bless Thy dying ones; soothe Thy suffering ones; pity Thine afflicted ones; shield Thy joyous ones. And all, for Thy love's sake.

St Augustine