

**Sermon 23rd June 2019**

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**Understanding vulnerability: a path to personal and spiritual growth**

I wonder how many of you listen to the Today Programme on regular basis on Radio 4? There are many good reasons for doing so. For me it's my daily fix of politics and current events. There are some spectacular Thoughts for the day, usually when they come from the Portsmouth studios. But there is one part of this particular programme which fills me with dread. It usually happens about twice a week at about ten to seven. The presenter says, portentously, "new research has shown" and at that point I'm afraid I switch the off button. Because what usually follows is a very unsatisfactory exploration, by a presenter with limited scientific or statistical knowledge, of a very complex piece of research, with very nuanced results, with a poor academic who has spent many years doing this and is expected to reduce it to a three minute soundbite. As a result of this we often get very confusing results and this confusion is often very misleading.

Unfortunately for me though, as a clinical scientist I have to consider all these papers for therapeutic reasons. One of the key issues that emerges in looking at the papers about human behaviour and human experience is that they talk about disorder as if, somehow, we have ultimate knowledge of all disorders but in fact what they have done is take a whole series of human characteristics together and label them. Now this is quite useful in scientific research but actually doesn't do much for us in our understanding. They use the format of well established disorders but that can be a problem because many of the mental disorders or mental illnesses or mental health problems are collections of symptoms which are variations on our common experience. Actually what they are talking about is vulnerability.

Now vulnerability, basically, is the sum of the effects of a whole range of things on us; our inheritance, be that the inheritance of living with parents or siblings for a period of time or our DNA and also our experience of what life has dealt to us and how we responded. Vulnerability is also dependent on our competence. If we overcome things we feel more confident about them and consequently feel more competent in the world generally. On the other hand if we have a particularly bad experience we can end up feeling very frail.

Vulnerability is at our essence. We are all vulnerable. We are all the sum, in many ways, of our own vulnerabilities; those developed by ourselves and those handed on to us.

There is a key to understanding human development and it is about vulnerability. A small child first develops and understands a sense of vulnerability when they realise that their parents can't do everything, that mummy and daddy can't make everything right and that bad things happen but the positive side is that they live through the experience and they live to fight another day. Then in adolescence the realisation dawns that you will never play for the football team of your dreams or no matter how good you are at Karaoke a place in the Cathedral Choir is out of the question. Similarly as an adult when faced with a first born child and looking at this wonderful bundle of joy you think "where is the instruction manual?". Then as an older adult you are confronted with all the vulnerabilities of older age.

Understanding vulnerability both of ourselves and other people is the key to our development. Learning to adapt and respond allows us to grow. It allows us to place things in context; not to be complacent but to be realistic.

Once we are exposed in terms of our vulnerabilities we have two paths. There is a path towards disorder such as anxiety, depression, personality problems or a sense of helplessness but there is also a potential for growth. So what enables us therefore to adapt and take the positive path? Often it's about having a source of support and reassurance. The basis of recovery and growth is acceptance, context and community.

There is modern tendency to define things in terms of disorder and there are a number of definite disorders which require skilled intervention but they are relatively few. "Disorder" defines but it also separates. It suggests the experience is abnormal and nowhere is this more clear than in the area of grief and bereavement. There is nothing more normal, for human beings, than the experience of grief and bereavement but yet people talk as if it weren't. One of the best summaries of the whole issue of grief and bereavement was in the line quoted by Her Majesty the Queen after 9/11 which was actually written by Colin Murray-Parkes, a very eminent psychiatrist. "Grief" he said "is the price we pay for love". But in our society we often feel uncomfortable with other people's distress so talking about disorder gives us a form of self protection. We reflect responsibility onto others; the individual; the state; the NHS. Disorder as a concept suggests a lack or an impairment or a degree of inferiority. The phrase "pull yourself together" is very common amongst those who don't understand. But disorder also denies the universality of vulnerability. It denies the responsibility of community to aid recovery. It pushes an individual towards "treatment". It doesn't embrace or console or give context. It also allows us to deal with inconvenient truths and the church too uses this in some ways; you've heard the phrase "hate the sin love the sinner" and that is often denying the vulnerability of the individual being labelled a sinner.

Now this is strange in the Christian Church because vulnerability is the essence of the incarnation. Christ became human and engaged with all our vulnerabilities. He didn't live with a posh family in Jerusalem he lived in Nazareth and we know the attitude of the establishment from that throwaway line in scripture "what good ever came out of Galilee?" He was subject to temptation, he lived with the excluded. His life was, throughout his ministry, one of somebody showing vulnerability and frailty. Then we move to Holy Week and we find in the translation of scripture the phrase "he humbled himself" repeatedly during that period. An equally good translation could be "he made himself vulnerable". Vulnera, in Latin, from which vulnerability derives means wounds.

Vulnerability is the essence of humility; the essence of charity; the essence of community and is at the heart of prayer.

The lessons of the Gospel are about understanding frail human beings and Christ's response. Scripture cautions us against judgement. It allows us to acknowledge frailty and also gives us the great promise of grace which is not earned but bestowed in spite of our nature.

Vulnerability is part of what we are; all of us. Understanding this allows us to grow and deal with what life throw at us. Therapeutic progress requires this understanding as it leads to a shared sense of the need for healing. Even if others can provide skilled help, community support is still essential to recovery and making whole.

The language of disorder separates, isolates, deflects responsibility and it may lead us to question the great promises of the grace of God and that we are all made in His image.

I'll leave you with a few lines from a hymn by Henry Twells

O Saviour Christ thou too art man

Thou hast been troubled tempted tried

Thy kind but searching glance can scan

The very wounds that shame would hide

Thy touch has still its ancient power

No word from thee can fruitless fall

Hear in this solemn evening hour

And in Thy mercy heal us all

Amen