

Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity on Sunday March 3rd 2008

by the Reverend Alan Neale
“What is the What” – Depression

Today we come to the fourth in our Lenten Sermon series which is looking at the One Book, One Philadelphia text “What is the What” (called by one reviewer “a sprawling epic” based on the life of Valentino Achek Deng who, along with thousands of other children – the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan – was forced to leave his village at the age of seven and trek hundreds of dangerous, inhumane miles by foot to find freedom). We are looking at the book through the lens of the classic five stages of grief and through the eyes of our Christian minds and our Christian Scriptures.

The classic five stages of grief (delineated so clearly nearly forty years ago by the thanatologist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross) are denial – anger – bargaining – depression – acceptance. They occur at any loss – major or minor, life-threatening or incidental; they may follow no strict order but, please God, all lead to a healthy acceptance and they are generally not short-term though contrast this advertisement I read recently online... “You’re About To Learn the Secret to Curing Depression That Most People Will Never Know... How to permanently cure depression in... three minutes”!!!

I can remember vividly, as if it were yesterday, a speaker at a Christian conference speaking about depression based on Psalm 42... why such a vivid memory for depression seems to be a deep part of our humanity, what it is to be human.

Valentino Achek Deng suffers loss throughout the book... loss of home, of family, of friends, of hope. We have seen him experiencing denial, anger and last week bargaining... today depression!

At an early stage of his journey Deng begins to confront the traumatic loss of his home, security and probably family. He says that he “only wants to go home”... his friend and leader, Dut says, “‘There’s nothing there. No homes... just dust and horses and blood. You saw this. No one lives there now’. Dut saw something in my face. I was exhausted, and I suppose it was then that I finally felt the crush of it. Dut held me by the shoulders, ‘This group doesn’t cry. Achak. Do you see anyone crying? No one is crying’”.

Depression... it’s all there in those words... exhaustion, the feeling of being crushed, an inability even to cry, an overwhelming numbness, deadness!

Later in the book Deng tells of a conversation with a Japanese aid worker who had become a close friend. The aid worker is bemoaning the absence of his girlfriend. Deng comments, “*Your girlfriend!* You’re complaining about missing your girlfriend. I don’t have a family!. He said, “Yeah, But you’re used to it”. We found this funny and it became a refrain between us – Yes, but you’re used to it!”.

Depression is often caused as we endure loss... feel that this is all there is (yes, but you’re used to it)... and suffer helplessness.

In fact I wonder whether some readers of this book, like me, were not a little depressed after reading it as we faced the facts that we have not, cannot solve this awful pain easily... at a stroke. Faced the facts that power is limited and that the will to help is often weak. Deng says, “The civil war became, to the world at large, too confusing to decipher, a mess of tribal conflicts with no clear heroes and villains”... just all too depressing but then, friends, on a global scale are we not “just used to it”?

The writer of our first lesson (a reading from the first book of Samuel), the writer tells us that Samuel has been grieving for a long time over Saul. “How long will you grieve over Saul?”. Samuel is suffering bereavement... King Saul is soon to die, Samuel’s hopes and expectations have been dashed and we read even the Lord “regrets that he made Saul king” (now there’s a theological puzzle to consider sometime!).

No wonder then that Samuel shows some classic signs of depression... he is fearful (“if I go, Saul will kill me”), he feels inadequate to the task of finding a king (“How can I go?”) and he has become numb, losing his gifts, talents, pastoral and prophetic sensitivity (he needs hear the Lord tell him “Do not look on the outward appearance... look on the heart”). Time was when Samuel would have realized immediately whom it was that God was calling but he makes a mistake and then needs God, as it were, to tap him on the shoulder and give him a refresher in Counselling 101... “look on the inside, not on the outside”.

But note that Samuel does, at least, the next right thing... he fills the horn with oil, he sets out to Jesse’s home and he practices what he is to say to Jesse, practices what he is to say – who would believe it? All might seem a little beneath his dignity... this man is accustomed to the bold gestures, the big picture, the spontaneous utterance but the Lord knows best.

Like a good shepherd, the Lord wants to lead the one depressed to a place of relative joy and liberty but He will often do it one step at a time, one day at a time... just do the next right thing! As we walk with our Shepherd so we regain a new confidence and a new trust in God, that He is good, that He has good purposes for us and that He is powerful... and we regain a new confidence in ourselves!

This past week I heard someone say, “I am happy that... I am not as depressed as I have been!”. Now there’s a statement of gratitude, of hope but also of patient, steady progress.

When Jesus meets the blind man, he brings about his healing but note that that Jesus moves him from inactivity (Go, wash) and he rescues him from isolation (When Jesus heard that they had driven him out, he found him).

The Lord who has made you, who has made me, has a task for us and He wishes, yearns, that we find community... there is the beginning of moving through depression... with the Lord for He is our Shepherd... he will offer us rest, direct us to action, revive and renew our spirits, make known his presence and lead us to blessing!

Throughout the novel Deng is given many names... Achak (from his parents), Valentino (his baptismal name), Dominic (from a teacher), Gone Far (because of the long trek out of war-wracked Sudan) but also SLEEPER... bestowed on Deng by a young girl who found him lying in the road... half-blind and longing for death. SLEEPER! Thus is the one who is depressed, suffering profound bereavement and loss... they are half-blind and see no light, no hope, no purpose and they “long for death” in one form or another.

Well to such a one St. Paul’s triumphant, confident words are these, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you”.

May those who are depressed and suffer loss hear these words clearly and be quickened, renewed and strengthened by them for His goodness and His mercy will follow us... or as the Message translation reads “Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I’m back home in the house of GOD for the rest of my life”.

Thanks be to God. Amen

