

Here are some poems, reflections and suggested non-biblical readings. We will continue to update this list over time. Please contact us if you have suggestions for items to be included.

Well known poets whose work grows out of their experience of mental health problems are:

John Clare
William Cowper
Gerard Manley Hopkins
Christopher Smart
Sylvia Plath
Anne Sexton
William Blake

Writings of Saints

Julian of Norwich
St John of the Cross (on 'the dark night of the soul');
St Aelred of Rievaulx (on friendship);
St Teresa of Avila.

From Christopher Newell

God of the Darkness

God of the darkness and the deep growing places,
We say at the beginning of our Eucharist worship,
That 'all hearts are open, all desires known,
May you reside with me, for a time, in the warm
Space of the unknown, of the fearful, and of the frozen,
That you may not so open my heart, as embrace its fear of breaking,
As you may not so know the desire of its hoping as accept the fear of its
Ending and as you may not shine a light that is blinding, but reside with me
In the darkness of its keeping, and holding, and discern the smallest of
Seed in the impossible hope of its growing.
Keep me warm and safe in the darkness of your residing, O Lord. Amen

Christopher Newell 2012

A POETIC REFLECTION ON DEPRESSION

There is a word called Jouissance
A word I can't translate
It describes a dance of unities
Of sufferings, joys, and fate.
We humans seek to always split
The good times from the bad;
But Life does not always work like that
and here's a tale of happiness
within the turmoil of the sad.
A priest does sit amidst his
books of Resurrection Faith
and sits and sits and sits and sits
like a frozen thing-a ghostly wraith.
He cannot move He cannot speak
No God No Christ is here
The silence of his unworthiness
Sits heavily amidst his fear.
'Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit oh shit'
Is the deepening cry
When quietly, so tenderly the door opens
without a fuss or sigh.
A little hand moves lovingly
It holds a cup of tea
and places it with careful ease
Next to the old settee.
A daughter's hand, a daughter's love
Barely eight years old but wise
Beyond her years, kisses a frightened cheek
And shatters melancholy's lies.
No easy healing is done this day
No empty tomb is found.
But somehow in the suffering
He knows he's safe and sound.
There is a word called Jouissance
A word I can't translate
It describes a dance of unities
Of suffering, love, and fate.

Christopher Newell August 2012

From Rosie Woods

SURVIVAL

How do I survive this, Lord?
When every thought, every feeling
Pulls me under, away from you,
Away from all that is healthy in me
I feel overcome, over-run,
Out of control of all that would make me whole.
Fear clamps my entrails,
And lies about what is safe
And unsafe to do.
Decision making, hard enough at any time
Becomes impossible, since every decision
Seems to be the wrong one,
Opening the door to greater terror
And self-condemnation.
Where are you, Lord, in this,
When loneliness stalks my mind
As I isolate myself more and more,
From others, your world, and you.
And the greatest fear,
That this agony is all there is for me in life,
Not for an evening in a garden,
Or three hours on a Cross,
Three days in a tomb,
But all that there is.
How to live with that fear and not despair.
How do I do it Lord,
And how do I let you close enough
To do what I cannot do.

Rosie Woods August 2012

EMERGING

Alone
in the tomb I wait,
weighed down by stones immovable.
The landscape is bleak,
limited by darkness and bastillions of fear,
too frozen for even tears to flow.
And the waiting is long, the weight heavy to bear.
Alongside me waits my God,
shedding helpless tears of powerlessness,
yet working too at levels
deep within my soul.
Others too watch and wait,
believing in a spring
which to me comes only in the Dreamtime.

Then into the darkness a voice calls,
echoing in many ways,
in friendship, in rhyme and rhythm,
in story and in song,
Talitha, cum,
the voice calls,
welcoming, enfolding,
and slowly, inch by painful inch
the stones are lifted,
(though the cost is often high.)
Some I lift, gasping for air and light,
while others fade away into phantoms,
as the communities in my life
stay or go,
according to their journeys.
Some are lifted for me,
by the graceful hand of God,
moving surely now in a soul more open to receiving.
And angels too are there,
some acting, being, trusting,
each one empowering me with love and faith.

In the light I am dazzled,
and try to dance,
free and unboundaried,
exploring, laughing, growing,
forgetful of the grave clothes that bind tightly,
till I fall and return to the tomb,
carrying new maps, new wisdom,
deepening of faith to explore the darkness,
sure now of finding light.

Once more I emerge,
led by the same gentle Spirit of life and hope,
and grave clothes unwind,
sometimes tripping me in my haste,
messy with woundedness and pain,
and sometimes shining gold in glint of Son.
Wounded I emerge,
yet stronger for the wounds,
rejoicing in new life,
new ways of living.

And now, now it is time,
time to risk allowing others near,
to unbind the wounds yet raw,
to help in healing and in wholeness,
in intimacy deeper than before.
I shrink a little,
afraid of pain, of ripping skin new healed,
yet know this is the only way.

The tomb still beckons.
It has been a place of safety, of the known,
a retreat from light and pains of growth,
a barrier to love.
I know something of its power, its facination,
but I choose to move forward
into life,
to love,
to new horizons,
remembering with gratitude and faith
its place within my story,
yet looking forward
to a newer way of Love, yet to be found.

Rosie Woods, August 2000

Resurrection

I am tired of this restoration, this resuscitation,
Tired of being the bulb, layer upon layer,
Deep in soil and muck, yet still able
To dig down roots, reach shoots skywards,
Green and glowing and full of life,
Vibrant with colour,
Till the cycle begins again,
And bit by bit, I shrink and die;
No-one knowing, understanding,
The fear and pain.
After all, this is simply nature,

And when the fog descends
The plants are poisoned and sink deep
Into the cloying earth wilting then re-growing,
To give please to those who see
Not the failure, the darkness,
The "is this the endless to be"
But only the brightness and the colour.
I am tired of this!
I want something new, something different,
Something which does NOT follow at the night does the day.
I seek something more radical,
Something beyond nature, beyond my human powers.
Yeats wrote "A terrible beauty is born"
Is this the time? Do I truly want
An untamed God,
Loose,
In my life, my home, my work
The depths of my soul?
Do I truly want resurrection this Easter?

All I know is, that I am tired of resuscitation.
I want to live, not as I have lived,
But more, throwing off the past like a carapace
Delighting in each morn.

I don't believe I can do this by myself.
Can you Lord, or at least show me how?

Rosie Woods, Holy Week 2006

Two reflections from Revd Christopher Newell, a Mental Health Chaplain with lived experience of mental health.

‘HOLY COMMUNION’ AND VISIONS IN A MENTAL HEALTH WARD

- I could not receive the gentle priest’s offer of communion, for I was convinced that, as soon as my tongue touched the bread and sipped the wine, my mouth would explode with the arrogance of my guilt and the simple knowledge of my evil. And yet another way might be sought; another path to retrieve an understanding of the mystical communion twixt Christ and this particular lost disciple, lost priest of the lost sacrament.
- And there it was. I found temple, sanctuary, altar and gathering in a smoke filled room where angels rested their tired wings on the heavy shoulders and trembling hands rolling their own and rolling for others too as plastic cups of sweetened tea were passed so sacramentally along the row.
- And in the night when sleep failed to come and a sympathetic nurse opened the kitchen and allowed us in to make our toast and tea, then in a smoked filled room, carpeted by strands of Golden Virginia and, possibly for the brave who could take it, Old Holborn, Eucharist was shaped and so deeply celebrated by no longer forgotten stories because they were shared by souls no longer alone and by the sacred things of fags and toast and tea. And a forgotten priest found sacrament again and a mere hint of re-connection with vocation faintly, oh so faintly dreamt.
- And I saw the angels flap their wings and fly.

Revd Christopher Newell-May 2012

Reflection on Jeremiah.

‘Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that are uncertain. Therefore, thus says the Lord: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth.’

Jeremiah Chapter 15 : verses 18-19

I had recently been discharged from hospital for my mental health problems, a fairly regular occurrence over the years. Feeling fragile, beset by a sense of overwhelming worthlessness, exacerbated by the constant accusatory voices I experience, my wife, Diane, decided it would be good to get away for a few days. Not too far, as I was in the care of the Home Treatment team, and if anything did descend into a crisis again, we would not be too far away from help. So we travelled to Exeter for a few days and on the Sunday I decided to attend the Eucharist. This is not an easy experience for me when I am unwell because of the voices telling me what a fake Christian I am and how despicable it is for me to even contemplate breaking bread with the broken, my brokenness being of my own miserable making. But go I did, strengthened by the unfailing faithfulness of my wife. And amidst all the ceremony, colour, and musical magic of cathedral worship as well as the wise reflection of the preacher, what I heard in and through and above my vainglorious voices, were these beautifully spoken words from that most honest and human of prophets, Jeremiah. How angry he was with God, how painfully honest about his struggle to overcome his wounds that refuse to heal or be healed by God. How angry I realized I was too as I heard these words. Why, why must I constantly be assailed by the voices of my self that too refuse to be healed? Why do the fearful children inside still scream out for their cries to be heard?

I won't indulge myself by elaborating, nor did Jeremiah. I only knew, that somehow, Jeremiah knew what I knew, and even more wonderfully strange, God knows what both Jeremiah and I knew, without offering empty words of comfort or healing. God offered Jeremiah the invitation, for an invitation it always is, to turn back, to repent in traditional theology, but to turn back and see again the fire in which he has been formed and stand face to face with his God, in the broken-heartedness of his pain and wounded-ness and speak that which comes from his precious humanity and the reality of his honesty. That's what God needs from those who call out his name and that voice amongst and within all the other voices is heard and honoured and treasured. No cheap healing, no cheap grace, no shying away from the real, and the troubled and the struggle. For that is what discipleship is made of, our true selves, especially those that cry out for justice and the right to be heard, especially from our God. And I left the cathedral, with the voices still resonating as much ever, with the fragility even more fragile and the vulnerability even more vulnerable and even the anger more angry than ever, but with all of it, every last piece of the broken jigsaw of it, unutterably precious, to my family and friends, to the people I seek to serve, and the God who continues to call me in the sacred mess of it all.

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