

Thank you for coming. Thank you to HTB for hosting us.

Emotional Health and Christian Theology - a good topic for a conference. Christians with an interest in mental health topics need to apply their minds to this, and the thinkers of the church need to get their heads round this increasingly important topic. The goal of all of this is to make the bride of Christ ready for her groom, for in this talk I want to look at some areas in which she is a bit grubby, a bit unconsidered and in need of change. The goal of St Paul's Theological Centre is to get some theology into the local church for, as the protestant reformers used to say, 'Ecclesia Semper Reformanda Est' - the church is always in need of reform. I may just a psychiatrist and not be a theologian, but I do know how to get some latin into my opening paragraph ;-)

And it is the church which is the focus of my talk today. In the last address I gave at our conference in Bradford a year ago I addressed three things we as believers can learn from secular progress - the role of medication as proven and appropriate for Christians, the bias the NHS has for the poor and how we can be challenged by this and the knowledge psychologists have on how people change and what we can learn from this. But today, I want to look at the church, for it is my assertion that this is where people still turn when in distress and this is where God has placed His hope. I want to look at why we do what we do at Mind and Soul, and what we need to do as a church. So:

1. Has our theology and our churchmanship become distorted from what it should be?
2. Has the effect of this been to look like we are supporting people with mental health problems but actually we are doing them and their faith harm?
3. If we can get our theology straight, do we have important and unique things to say to the wider mental health community about how they do things?, and
4. We must get this straight because maybe we have important things to say to our church!

I want to phrase this as three laws - not really laws, as will become clear, but they are plumb lines for us to measure and test what we do against, and they are 'irrefutable' in the sense that I think that though you will be able to pick holes in them, you would be unwise to ignore the direction they point.



To get you thinking about this I have put here a picture by Glasgow artist and reformed alcoholic, Peter Howson of the 'Third Step' of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA started as a Christian method for dealing with alcohol addiction and despite some strong liberal influences, it has remained spiritual to its core. The first 3 steps are these:

- Step 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable. In Christian speak - that we are sinners
- Step 2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. In Christian speak - that we need a Saviour and that one exists.
- Step 3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. In Christian speak - that we began to seek and follow this saviour.

And that is where we run into problems, because seeking and following the Saviour usually involves meeting some of his saints and going to his House. In this picture, you can see the seeker looking not to God or the Higher Power but to the Church. And this is what many in AA do - they do a few steps and start thinking seriously about going to church for they have had a spiritual experience.

And this is not restricted to addictions. Many when they are experiencing or recovering from depression or psychosis or in early dementia will have spiritual questions and so seek spiritual answers. We are still blessed in this country with a church on most prominent corners, so they need to be ready to receive! The local church is and always will be something of a Curates Egg, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to make sure that the excellent parts of it are more visible.



There are I think three areas where good theology would suggest a major change to how we currently manage psychological problems both in the church and in health care systems. To illustrate these three, I would like to have a fresh look at a Bible Passage many of you will have heard preached on a number of times. If you have a Bible with you turn to John 21v15. Jesus has risen from the dead and is in the process of catching a huge load of fish and cooking a hearty breakfast for the hungry disciples. I would have preferred bacon, but this was Israel...

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Now there are a couple of common sermons that get preached on this passage. The first is the reinstatement of Peter by Jesus after he had denied him before the crucifixion. This picture is of a statue depicting the event at Tabgha on the NW Coast of the Sea of Galilee. The lesson is typically about how God can use us despite our failures.

The second makes more of the fact that Jesus seemed to be making Peter the leader of the church on earth. Roman Catholics believe this literally, that Peter was the first Pope or 'Primate' and that this moment was the start of the church as they understand it. In fact this statue at Tabgha is next to the 'Church of the Primacy of Peter' on the very site where this amazing breakfast is said to have taken place.

But Peter wasn't just reinstated, he was also renewed - and this is a sermon on this passage you may have heard less often. But it is one I have preached and one I have heard preached. You could argue that three key principles of Counselling are seen in this passage and it is a nice outline!

1. **It is Painful.** Jesus is nothing if not blunt with the way he rams home the three interrogations about love to remind Peter of the three denials a few chapters earlier. And Peter was hurt. There is a time in any journey [counselling, spiritual or otherwise] when we have to fact up to the real facts and not the facts as we chose to see them. And this invariably hurts not only our pride but our hearts as well.
2. **It is Personal.** Any counsellor will tell you of the red herrings that seem to crop up whenever you are dealing with something important. Jesus is quick to draw Peter back from a diversion to the fate of John and back to his own issues. Their eyes meet; this is real and there are no masks.
3. **It is Permanent.** This is the goal of every Counsellor - to be able to make a *Lasting Change* in someone's life. Peter had a number of defining moments in his life, but this is arguably the greatest of them. His heart is broken, but it needed to be. This is after all one of the leaders of the fledgling church and he had better have foundations of 'Rock' and not feet of Clay.



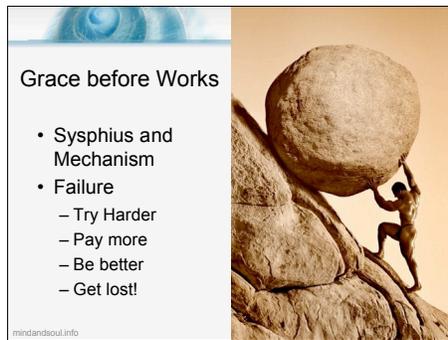
But there more we can learn from Peter than a few rhyming points to remind us what good counselling is. And in fact I think those three P's [beautiful though they were] are good examples of what happens when we come to the Bible wanting to preach on counselling and finding something that seems to fit the bill.

It's not that I don't agree with that counselling must be painful, personal and have lasting effects [I think it probably does to some degree]; but it would be a mistake for us to think that passage was a good model for how we manage mental distress in the church today and for us to take it out of context and ignore all else that is said about Peter's as He grows towards God.

In the rest of this talk, I want to look at some other things we are told about Peter that makes us rethink what is going on in his heart. I will summarise these as the three irrefutable laws I referred to earlier and ask if these would not be a better framework for our Christian communities. They are things you will probably agree with when I say them, but only when they are applied to how we currently deal with mental distress will it become clear how much we have to change.

They are very briefly:

1. **Grace before Works** - how we need to be constantly aware like in so many other areas of gospel ministry that the precious gift of grace is not lost behind a works-based thinking that seems so helpful and wise
2. **Integration before Isolation** - there may be a place for 1-2-1 counselling, but that must never be a substitute for how we counsel and heal as communities. To see the mentally unwell as 'over there in a counselling room getting sorted' is to isolate, dichotomise and stigmatise
3. **Redemption before Recovery** - Jesus died that our sins might be forgiven and that we might follow him to God, so the removal of symptom X or issue Y may or may not be part of that journey this side of heaven. Our pursuit of peace may not fit with following a crucified Christ. Like Peter is here...



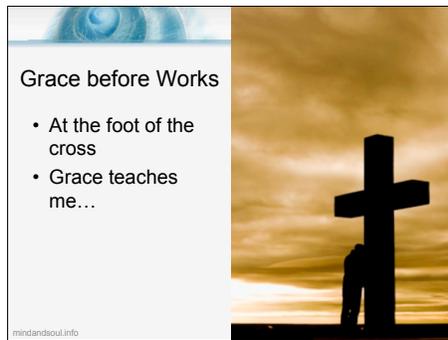
Therapy is based, believe it or not, on science. Freud was a neurologist before he became a psychoanalyst. Psychiatrists like myself are medically trained. And 'effective therapies' are called effective because of 100 people follow model X, then more will get better than if they do nothing. But this requirement to prove efficacy is inherently flawed because not all great things are effective - think of the last time you spent a foolish amount of money on someone you love!

The result of all this 'scientific method' is therapies that are mechanistic - you put in symptom X and apply process Y and you should reap result Z. And we know from research that this is effective a large percent of the time. But to what cost? This picture is of a chap called Sysphius who in Greek Mythology [and I will spare you the myth - it is rather tortuous!] was condemned to push a rock up a hill only for it to roll down again and him to have to push it up again.

And this is the problem as not everyone sees result Z. Therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, the gold standard of many talking therapies today, can work wonders but if they don't for some reason you can be left with the very clear feeling that it is because you didn't try hard enough or didn't 'get it' deeply enough. To be sure, a good therapist will work against this by using the therapeutic relationships to show care and affection, but this doesn't change the fact that core process of the therapy is one of 'works = results'.

Or consider psychoanalytic therapy, made popular by Freud and still widely used today. If you do not improve it is because of 'unconscious resistance' or 'a regression' and here the therapist is not allowed to tell you that you are doing OK for fear of buying into their own neurosis of being a failure as a therapist.

And this happens in the church. We bring in works where grace should primarily operate. How many times in a ministry are people dropped from the team because they are not running fast enough? How many times have you heard an encouragement to put more in the offering bucket to show how much you want to change - How many times have your heard a preacher try to motivate his congregation, but fail to tell them clearly enough that he loves them just the way they are as well? How many times has resistance to change been seen as resistance to the 'gospel' and they ought to get lost and let the rst of us get on with the real job in hand of sharing the Gospel? Hmmm - was that the Gospel of Grace, or did I miss something?



What can we learn from Peter in John 21 on this. One thing we might do is to consider why Jesus asked Peter [out of all the others] to lead the fledgling church. Was it because of his great learning - no, he was a fisherman. Was it because of his ability to say the right thing at the right time - unlikely given his track record. Was it because he had always stood firm under persecution - not exactly!

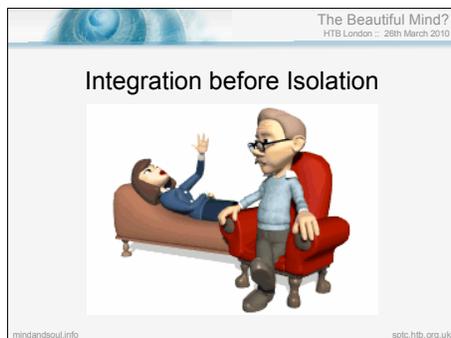
No, Jesus chose Peter because in John 21 he shows him the true nature of Grace. The three questions were not primarily designed to be painful - it is easy to ask someone a painful question and make them cry, but that is not good counselling. They were not designed to bring a feeling of guilt, though they may have done for a moment. They were instead each followed with a commission given in the full knowledge of frailty and with full awareness of the possibility that Peter might fail again. And in that moment, there was an unconscious communication of something very special.

I don't know if I can put it into words, but it was something like, "Peter, you see this feeling that you are experiencing right now - this acceptance, this approval, this new birth and new chance - don't ever forget this, for this is grace and this is the Gospel I wish you to preach." Peter was able to be the greatest shepherd because he never forgot that he was the greatest sinner. Whilst others might have said to the sinners, "You need to go to the cross", Peter instead said, "You need to come to the foot of the cross, where I still cling and whence I have never left!" This is the Scandal of Christ, that he will choose those who seem to be last and make them first, those who seem weak and make them strong, those who have no logical human hope and give them a name and a future!

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The great sadness of this is that these strategies are so short term. One of the great things about studying theology and history is you learn that all of our mistakes have been made before and that God tends to advance his church over a few decades not a few days! The great irony of a works-based approach to change is that it doesn't work half so well as grace and love and hope! In the talking therapies, some seem to have evidence and a face validity, but the fact remains that far any way the most important thing - way more important than this or that school technique or book - is the therapeutic relationship, the place of trust, exploration and [sometimes painfully slow] journey. And Christians are in the fortunate position of being able to state the reason for this love for it is the love we ourselves have received at the Cross of Jesus.

What we find, as it tell us in Titus 2:12, is that this grace actually TEACHES us to change far better than any rod. Martin Luther talked about the SCHOOL of grace, which will change our wills to match the will of God. There is a time for works, as James will tell us, and a time for targets, strategy and goals; but only ever, only ever AFTER a robust place is given to Grace.



And so onto the second of the 'Irrefutable Laws' and here is a picture of me at work! Serously though, most people think this is what I do all day. I don't have a couch in my room [though it might be handy for a short siesta every so often ;-)] but it shows what people think about how you get better from mental health problems - you go into a room and do something weird with a therapist and don't come out until it is sorted! We go there to talk about secret stuff that we would be embarrassed to talk about in public because that might damage our British sensibilities. And we can misunderstand John 21 where Jesus dealt with Peter by himself - presumably for fear of spreading Peters issues to the remaining ten!

Getting more serious however, to have a 'counsellor on the staff' is something many churches want today. In the 80s it was youth worker, in the 90s it was a worship leader, in the noughties we wanted an expert in all this emotional stuff that kept on popping up! In our counselling models, there is a great desire to get people off into a small room [like this one] and There are, to be sure, times to do things on a 1-2-1 setting - and I do a fair bit of that in my work. But, like we did with CBT, we need to look at the bigger consequences of this practice and see if it is really good for our mental health and see if it is consistent with our faith.

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Turn over one page from John 21 and read something really interesting about Peter. Something changes. He was the chief sinner, the one who denied Jesus. He was the one who Jesus seemingly had to draw away and 'get personal with' on the beach. Yet in 1v15 we see him standing up "surrounded by the believers", and he is given a platform to speak to believers. Again, just over the page in 2v11 we see he stands up "with the Eleven" and he is given a platform to speak to thousands who do not know Jesus. And this was a guy who if we believe the three-P's model of counselling was having some pretty serious questions asked of him just a few weeks before.

Yet is this how we behave is we know someone is seeing the church counsellor. Are we willing to be there friend? Can we trust them? Would we ask them to lead our fledgling church? However, who is it who really needs the counselling? To see the mentally unwell as 'over there getting sorted' is to isolate them from many other sources of help, to dichotomise the congregation into the sick few and the sane many [a pleasant fantasy if I ever heard one] and to stigmatise that group as somehow unclean until they can be 'like us'.

The reality is probably the exact opposite Those seeing the church counsellor are probably the enlightened among us who are actually doing something about their problem, the real ones among us who have humbled themselves and taken off the mask that many of us still wear and the ones among us who most understand the importance of true friends and deep community.





John 21 ends with some lovely works - "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." After this great breakfast on the beach, it is tempting to 'cue credits' and run the end of the film. The camera pans out to a shot like this and everyone lives happily ever after... Peter has been set right by Jesus and is a fitting leader for the church. All is well, and the next bit of the story can wait for the sequel for all that's really needed is to wrap the whole thing up and win the world.

Luckily for us, we have the rest of the New testament to tell us that Peter's epiphany was far from permanent and that he would go on to make a number of other major errors! [Mission to Gentiles, No need for Circumcision]. His path, though maybe going slowly up hill was rocky to say the least. He remained at the foot of the cross. He followed Jesus and it led ultimately to his own cross.

Yet, I wonder if we are so objective when we see varied progress among others. There is a great movement today for self-improvement and for getting things sorted. We are not meant to tolerate people who are stuck or backslide or waver or have 'bad days' or fail to progress. And yet this is what the experience is like for many people recovering from mental health problems - oh, and for many who are not but just don't seem to have found the key to a Hollywood life just yet.

We as outsiders can so easily find ourselves looking on a person's life and see them struggle, maybe even to the point of depression and come up with all sorts of assumptions about how they OUGHT to be getting better - getting FIT so they can go out there and save the lost. But we may be so far off the mark it is not true. They may actually be following Jesus a lot more closely than we are:

1. The mother caring for her three children under five because the father has left home
2. The young man keeping quiet about the family debt because he knows how fragile his father's self-esteem is
3. The woman who goes to church on Sundays and is the only one in her family who does
4. The man who is passed over for promotion because he is starting to stick his head above the parapet for Jesus in his place of work

There are many reasons why following Jesus can be difficult, and sometimes it is just a good old fashioned wilderness period - King David had a number of them. But my point is not to expect a perfect and 100% recovery in most cases and in many cases, we need to consider whether the removal of 'Symptom X' is really what is on God's radar. Perhaps it is more important to learn to live alongside our thorns, to tolerate the one whose faith is 'weak', and have a special modesty for the 'less honourable' parts. The film is not over yet...

The Beautiful Mind?  
HTB London - 26th March 2010



**Summary**

- An Atmosphere of Grace
- An Alongside Community
- An Amazing Lord

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We have said we believe in three 'irrefutable' laws

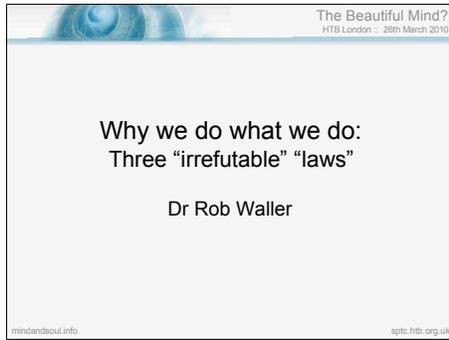
1. **To pursue Grace before Works** - to be careful we are not saved by grace and yet expected to live by works, and never to depart from the foot of the cross
2. **To pursue Integration before any time of Isolation** - that people may know they are loved and accepted and matter, and that we are all beggars seeking bread
3. **To pursue Jesus and Redemption before Recovery** - because these two may be compatible or they may not, and to never condemn ourselves by what we approve

But what does this look like? This conference is about seeing the local church changed by Theology. So to finish with may I offer three simple pointers for churches to strive towards.

- A. Let us pursue an Atmosphere of Grace - places where a culture of affirmation is valued above the march of progress - for affirmation is always progressive, where the preaching is about how God has loved us rather than how much we need to love on the world - for one will follow from another.
- B. Let us pursue an Alongside Community - where we journey together in the downs as well as the ups, where the Holy Spirit is truly the Parakletos, (the alongside presence) - not using the carrot of His healing or the stick of grieving His presence.
- C. Let us pursue an Amazing Lord - sharing testimonies not just of triumph but also of times of testing that may still be going on, emphasising what it is about HIM that causes Him to love and use us, not what it is about US that He has done so.

I would love to talk more on this, but there is the whole day ahead of us. There are many seminars today and I would love to go to them all. Many are by dear friends, some are by new friends and it would be invidious of me to make a recommendation. But I wish you an amazing day and for much to take home. We dream of a beautiful mind for a beautiful Bride - dressed in white and waiting for her Lord.

If you want a meditation, I can do no better than to recommend Romans 13v8. It is inscribed on the inside of my wedding ring: "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law". Cain killed his brother, and then asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper" and was met with the answer of a resounding "Yes!"



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Why we do what we do:  
Three “irrefutable” “laws”

Dr Rob Waller

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