



ABRAHAM LINCOLN, DEPRESSION, AND THE VALUE OF SADNESS

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'The truest of all men was the man of sorrows.' Moby Dick

DEPRESSION AND OTHER MENTAL ILLNESSES are a terrible problem today. Depression has been called the leading cause of non-fatal disability in Australia, each year afflicting about one million Australian adults and one hundred thousand young people, and costing over six hundred million dollars (www.beyondblue.org.au/14 Spetember 2007). The World Health Organisation estimates that around 877,000 people die by suicide each year (www.who.int/mental_health/en/14 Spetember, 2007). In such circumstances, we can only be grateful that depression has come to be commonly understood through a medical paradigm: depression is widely regarded as a *sickness*.

This general success of the medical paradigm for understanding depression should be regarded as a great blessing. It has led to a broader public awareness of the problem and encouraged sympathy and understanding for sufferers (although not as fully as we might hope); and it has meant relief for many through various advances in treatment.

Importantly for Christians, the medical understanding of depression also forces us to clarify thinking on a number of issues. First, understanding depression as an illness helps to keep us away from a dualism where the mind is set over against the body. Mental

illness reminds us that the mind is part of the body, and the body, we know, will not be redeemed until the resurrection, when 'this perishable body must put on imperishability' (1 Cor. 15:53). Even those who have been born again through faith in the Lord Jesus live now in bodies (including brains) that the apostle Paul describes as 'weak' (1 Cor. 15:43), 'soulish' (1 Cor. 15:44), 'our mortal flesh' (2 Cor. 4:11), 'mortal bodies' (Rom. 6:12; [8:11]), and 'this body of death' (Rom. 7:24). For now we 'groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies,' including, we must now stress, the redemption of our minds.

But second, understanding depression as a sickness helps us steer clear of an unhelpful over-spiritualisation of the issues. A church which knows that sickness can affect the mind—and therefore moods, emotions, fears, hopes, and relationships—will be very careful with ideas like 'demon-possession.'

However, all these benefits notwithstanding, perhaps it is still important to ask whether the medical paradigm is sufficient to understand depression, whether recognising that depression is a sickness puts an end to the task of description; and also whether exclusive attention to this medical understanding might have any negative effects?

There are good reasons to argue that there is more to say about depression than that it is sickness, just as there is more to say about sickness than that it is sickness. The Scriptures have a far more holistic view of human life than this: they see sickness

as a symptom of this world's brokenness, a brokenness which the Son of God came to heal. They also have much to say about the broader category of suffering, and the ways it can be used within God's purposes to save his people (e.g. Heb. 12:5-13). So as we seek to understand the phenomenon of depression, we must not neglect these broader dimensions. For those who believe in the God who became a man, spiritual realities and physical realities cannot be held apart. We live our lives of faith in bodies, and it is with hands and toes and tongues that the struggle against sin takes place.

This has profound significance for mental illness; because if we live out our faith in our bodies, we do so particularly in our minds. And if all illness can be for us a spiritual challenge, mental illness can be especially so. Although great care is needed, Christians suffering from depression and other illnesses of the mind are surely right to seek to understand the *spiritual* challenges their condition presents. For example, in Revelation 12:10, John describes the devil as 'the accuser of our brothers... who accuses them day and night before our God.' The experience of feeling accused is more than comprehensible to many Christians with depression, who may struggle with overwhelming sensations of guilt and inadequacy. A belief in sin and the God who rules over all things for good makes possible a richer description of illness than a purely medical paradigm is capable of.

Yet, perhaps more important than this is the possibility that exclusive attention to the

medical paradigm can lead us to miss some of the positive aspects of melancholy. In particular, it may have the unfortunate side-effect of making us think that all sadness is bad—a kind of illness—and that wellness equals constant happiness. At this point, Abraham Lincoln can help us.

In his fascinating book, *Lincoln's Melancholy*, published in 2005, American author Joshua Wolf Shenk sketches an outline of Abraham Lincoln's experience of depression. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Abraham Lincoln suffered from chronic depression at periods throughout his life. In many ways he was a classic case: several of Lincoln's relatives are likely to have suffered from depression, which alerts us to a genetic predisposition to the illness; he suffered several major tragedies early in life, including the death of his mother and brother; then later it is clear that he suffered many of the symptoms now used to identify depression, to the point of frequently considering suicide during particularly bad periods.

In Lincoln's day depressive illness was known as *melancholia*. Significantly, however, melancholia was not disconnected from general sadness, or 'melancholy', but was more like the darker end of the melancholy spectrum. Shenk explains:

The big difference is that today we often hear that the disease of depression is entirely distinct from the ordinary experience of being sad or in the dumps. But in the nineteenth-century conception of melancholy, these were part of the same overall picture. A person with a melancholic temperament had been fated with both an awful burden and what Byron called a 'fearful gift.' The burden was a sadness and despair that could tip into a state of disease. But the gift was a capacity for depth, wisdom – even genius. (p.27. The reference to Byron is from "The Dream").

According to Shenk, in Lincoln's day melancholy could be a valuable aspect of someone's life. It could signify 'an existential unrest, a gloomy or morbid state that lurked in the background of one's life, but also a connection to insight and a drive for heroic action.' (p.32) Shenk describes how many people who knew Lincoln shared this judgment. His melancholy was seen as a source of valuable insight and reflectiveness. 'Aware of the drawbacks, people around Lincoln were also well-attuned to melancholy's advantages. To be grave and sensitive—to feel acutely the agony and sweat

of the human spirit—was admired, even glorified.' (p.31.) Lincoln's melancholy was both a curse and a blessing. On the one hand it opened him up to dangerous depression, but on the other it fuelled his insight, poetry, wisdom, and remarkable leadership through the Civil War.

For Shenk, there is much in this perspective that is valuable. He argues that something is lost when, 'The modern understanding of depression... segregates its manifestation as a disease and its manifestation as a thoughtful, reflective sadness' (p. 32); because sadness can have great value, fostering insight, creativity, and moral courage.

Interestingly, a very similar understanding of these issues to that of Shenk emerges on the lips of the famous Ishmael in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ishmael, we learn on page one, goes to sea 'whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul... and especially whenever my hypos (short for hypocondriasis, a disease like melancholia) get such an upper hand of me...' Then, towards the end of the novel, the fire of the try-works leads Ishmael to the following energetic discussion:

[T]he sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon... that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true... The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes in the fine hammered steel of woe... he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing grave-yards, and would rather talk of operas than hell... not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon.

Yet Ishmael knows that sadness has grave dangers, and so he concludes with a sentence that in many ways sums up the message of Shenk's book, too: 'There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness.' (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* p.464-5)

This talk of 'wisdom that is woe' can sound strange to our modern ears, which have learnt much about the woe that is madness. Yet perhaps there is a wisdom in this more holistic perspective on melancholy that we forget to our detriment.

Lincoln's example and Ishmael's insights remind us of an important point: depressive illness and sadness are connected. People with more melancholic dispositions are sim-

ply more likely than others to experience depressive illness, and there is no perfect line dividing sadness from sickness. The medical paradigm rightly focusses its attention on one end of this spectrum—depressive illness. But there is more to the picture than this. There are other, less harmful forms of sadness, and other profoundly real reasons for sadness—broken relationships, the pain of isolation and conflict, failure, futility, fear, confusion. It is not hard to see the wisdom in not ignoring this bigger picture.

Christians, in particular, have profound reasons to be uncomfortable with the implication that *all* sadness is bad, and that wellness equals happiness. For Christians follow the Lord who was crucified, who in Isaiah's words was 'acquainted with grief' (Is. 53:3), and who told his disciples, 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh' (Lk. 6:21). The end of sadness can only be at the last day, when God himself will wipe tears from eyes and, 'mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev. 21:4). Life before that day is a matter of 'waiting', and 'groaning inwardly' (Rom. 8:23-27); and we sometimes are called to know our heavenly Father as, 'the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God' (2 Cor. 1:3-4). To be sure, Jesus came to give his sheep 'life in abundance' (Jn 10:10); but we have misunderstood him if we think this means uninterrupted happiness in the present. That would be profoundly out of step with God's ways with the world.

None of this is to say that the medical paradigm is bad, or unhelpful; it is essential, and the first thing to say in this discussion. But it is not the end of the discussion. Christians more than anyone else, because we know that the world and people are broken and waiting to be healed, need to insist that sadness is not always bad, but can be appropriate, an insight into the truth about life. We do well to hear Jesus' words, 'Blessed are you who weep now,' and remember Ishmael's remark that 'the truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows.'

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