

Published in the Church Times 18 September 2009

## **Disappointed? Who Me? Yes You!**

*'We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope. (Martin Luther King)*

One of the more disturbing pastoral conversations that rather shocked me was with parents who expressed their profound disappointment in their two children. I knew one child well and admired the other's confidence and skill very much. We all need some space to express our fears and negativities. This memory has been stirred by recent conversations where deep disappointment has been present if not articulated. One woman expresses her regret at the decline of the Church; less concerned about numbers and more its intelligence! A priest friend feels unsupported in his ministry in a tough part of suburban England. Another Doctor friend experiences being overlooked and cannot bear another experience of being a runner up in an interview for a senior post. A college friend coping with a third broken marriage. A hard working health service manager feels cannot remember the last time someone thanked them for their work. A bishop asked to manage the unmanageable (clergy!) and fears for the financial health of the Church. A stranger in conversation is frustrated with almost every aspect of life but does not know why. A neighbour is coping with a diagnosis of cancer with all of the uncertainty and threats to her contentment and health. Many people in our congregations are re-negotiating their relationship to both work and money in the present financial downturn.

We all feel disappointed. It is an inevitable part of our lot. The challenge and opportunity for growth is to understand the nature of our sense of disappointment, and explore how best we might deal with this powerful and potentially disabling emotion. Disappointment is the feeling of dissatisfaction that often follows when we feel that we have failed to meet what we expect or need. We may feel we have made the wrong decision or that circumstances are in some way against us.

Everybody that has expectations and desires in life will experience disappointment in one way or the other. We all experience disappointment. You will understand what it means for you and how it comes -when we expect something to happen soon or too soon; when the effort we put into something does not seem to produce results; when the best plans do not work out; perhaps even when we believe too much in people. None us like to feel frustrated when we expect things to happen in our own ways. There can also be disappointment when we expect things to happen rightly whether we have done what is wrong or not.

But it is the effects of disappointment that we should be aware of in self and others. Some bounce back and recover quickly; others mire in frustration, blame or even become depressed. If our disappointments remain unaddressed then they can have power over us and our attitudes. It is a mark of humane pastoral leadership to be in touch with these darker parts of our lives. We need to be aware of how this powerful emotion can produce a lack of trust, how easily relationships are destroyed. It changes our perceptions to life, people and things we do.

One of the disturbing things that I have experienced in my pastoral work is people who have come to hate life due to disappointment. They build up a very bad notion of the shape of life. They lack trust and hope.

So what are we to do as Christians about these experiences? First we should acknowledge the reality of disappointment and its power over us. We might need to want to move on. The right question is not "Why, Lord?" but rather, "What now, Lord?" Seeking God's answer to "What now?" helps us grow in faith. Our disappointments can be used and be worked through for our good. In the face of trouble, our natural tendency is not to ask the right question. Our natural tendency is to complain. Unfortunately, griping to other people rarely helps solve our problems. Instead, it tends to drive people away. If our Churches do not handle their disappointments then we perish in an inward looking pessimism.

This will require a commitment to listening – a pastoral desire to hear one another. We all need to pour our heart out to someone. Disappointment is too heavy a burden to bear. In this pastoral encounter we can be empowered to discern some value, meaning, and hope. We can find catalysts for mobilizing energy and finding satisfaction.

So how do we keep hope alive? First we may have to adjust our expectations. Not small Church is a failing Church. Not every applicant gets the job. Illness happens. Not every marriage soars. It might make sense not to set our goals so high. If our highest hope is in achievement, you we will eventually be disappointed—success is transient. Getting a proper balance can be elusive.

Second we should learn from your defeats. Disappointment and failure build character and patience, when allowed to do so. They can teach you to win and lose with grace, an increasingly lost art these days. And endurance develops strength of character.

Thirdly our Churches are places of opportunity to build and deepen friendships. We need to learn to be both open and vulnerable with each other. Could we create places where disappointment is understood?

Fourthly as we reflect on our life's journey we can go deeper with God. Our vulnerability, our hurts and insecurities can enliven faith and our trust in God's enduring love. Our focus is God's hope for us. The here and now of our present situation isn't the end of the story. "For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). God's plans are nearly always bigger than we think. God's love is the well deep enough to draw from when we need peace, hope and wisdom.

So let us abandon perfectionism for perfectionists live in their own imaginary world, they think that life is perfect and that they should be perfect in turn. As we make time to live in the real world let us be careful about overconfidence: deliver us from leadership that talks things up! The winners in this life are those who are balanced. Let us set realistic goals: something that can be really achieved and delight in the many small things of living. Let disappointment be the nurse of wisdom.