

Dear Friends,



A word not used so much these days is “stigma”. It was a word originally used for the label branded or pricked onto slaves, stemming from an ancient Greek word (via the Latin) for making a mark with a pointed instrument. It has come to mean a mark of shame, and interestingly it is also used by Christians for the marks of the nails on Jesus’ hands and feet.

There used to be a stigma relating to cancer, and prior to that leprosy, which is why people felt it so hard to talk about for fear of being assumed to be unclean or infectious. I hope people find it easier to talk about cancer these days and get the support they need emotionally.

More commonly, mental illness still undoubtedly carries a stigma – I’ve seen it. For someone to admit that they have suffered a mental breakdown or that they experience depression or anxiety attacks, that they are bipolar or, more broadly, have “mental health issues” can lead any of us, unwittingly perhaps, to make assumptions about them. While some people are so ill they cannot function day to day without a great deal of help, others live apparently “normal lives”, whatever that means, while wrestling inside. It may be there are certain triggers, which they need to avoid or minimise. I’m afraid the media often also link general mental health problems with violence, creating stereotypes. While there are some conditions which may make the sufferer a danger to themselves or others, by far the majority of people living with mental illness do not fall into this category, but they can still feel vulnerable to being stigmatised.

Jesus never judged anyone by their status, appearance, accent, wealth, mental health or any disease. Indeed, he reached out to touch them. He even used the physical stigma put on slaves as an illustration to speak out against prejudice when he said, “I no longer call you slaves...now you are my friends” [John 15:15]. If Jesus, knowing he would be stigmatised and rejected, can call us all friends, how much more are we called to befriend “the other”, the “odd-ball”, those ostracised by society, all who don’t fit in with our norms or who have conditions we don’t understand or fear. Let us in his name reach out to them.

Yours in Christ,

Handwritten signature of Kevin Wright

The Revd. Kevin Wright