Father Keith’s Pastoral Letter

“Black Dog”

In this strange spring season, we are being asked to be attentive to the condition of our own mental well being, and that of those around us. Even in a beautiful and well resourced community such as ours, an unfamiliar and constant pressure is being exerted on us. Consequently, some of you are perhaps feeling a certain lowering of the spirits: true, the days are growing longer, and we know that summer is coming, but there are many of us whose interior seasons-even in more stable times- do not correspond to the four of nature. For them- for us- darkness is as likely to fall at midsummer midday, as midwinter midnight. I am speaking of the Black Dog of depression.

Those of you have experienced this condition, whether temporarily, or chronically, will know what it is like- that it is to say, you will know that it is not like anything. It is an abysmal nothingness.

It is often said that it remains a condition about which no one wishes to speak. I don’t necessarily agree with that. All manner of people in the public eye have in recent times courageously “gone public” about their own experience of depression- though, in my more cynical moments, I have wondered whether having a narrative about this illness isn’t becoming as essential for a certain sort of celeb as teeth bleaching and Botox treatment. But, of course, far better to have a handful of possibly spurious stories circulating in the public domain than retuning to the embarrassed silence and ignorance of not so long ago. It seems to me that the trouble is not so much the quality and quantity of conversation on the subject, but that, in the end, as I have hinted, depression is ultimately beyond description: it is a sort of sinkhole, a featureless emptiness, a place with no handholds, it is an all consuming nowhere.

So what have I to contribute from the viewpoint of a Christian? I would say that faith does not eradicate the condition, anymore than it does diabetes, or celiac disease- but I would say that prayer and the sacraments have helped me to manage some of the symptoms of the condition, and recognise the thought
patterns that sometimes lead one towards the No Man's Land – at best, I am sometimes aware of a presence with me in the darkness.

For those of you who remain unafflicted, be patient with, and kind to, those who are suffering (though it true, and believe me, I know, that carers and loved ones suffer greatly too). For those who are effected in anyway, I offer prayers, trusting in the One whose light no darkness can overcome, and whose co-suffering love is poured out for all.

With prayers and blessings,

Father Keith