

be prepared: injustice as a junior doctor

Zack Millar explores our response



'WYWBWY'

I paused with a forkful of pasta halfway to my mouth. The consultant psychiatrist was discussing a case with me over lunch, and this acronym was totally unknown to me. 'I don't know what that means, I'm afraid', I confessed. 'Well', he said, 'sometimes a patient is depressed or suicidal, and you hear their story, and you find yourself thinking, "Well, you would be, wouldn't you?"'

This statement has resonated with me throughout my medical training and into my career as a doctor. The sad fact is, these stories are all-pervasive in medicine, not just in psychiatry. A significant proportion of the people I meet in my everyday practice have utterly tragic tales. I clerk patients who have lost three relatives in six months, been left by their spouse, fired from their jobs and diagnosed with cancer, only to wind up in A&E having been hit by a car. And that is sometimes the milder end of the spectrum.

Now, I believe in a sovereign God and I believe that injustice can be reconciled with his love. But how am I supposed to react to this as a Christian doctor? What can I do about it? Let me tell you how I deal with two different types of injustice.

sad injustice

Stories like those told by my 'WYWBWY' patients still get to me after three years of clinical school and one year of foundation training. Some people get an express train to privilege, while others must fight their way through an onslaught of tragedy and attack. I know that God has it all in his plan, and so sometimes I think I must be sinning if I feel sad about it. Maybe my trust in God is lacking somehow.

The Bible says no. To me, one of the most beautiful moments in the gospels is the account of Lazarus in John 11. The miracle itself is of course amazing, but I think the most beautiful part comes just before. Most translations say the same thing:



Zack Millar is an FY1 doctor in Cambridgeshire

'Jesus wept'.¹ It may be the shortest verse in the Bible, but I consider it one of the loudest. Jesus knew he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, and yet 'he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled'.²

Or take the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22. Jesus was in such anguish that 'his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground'.³ Here was the Messiah at the climax of his ministry. We do not find a stoic Jesus, looking into the middle distance while he eulogises about the sovereignty of God. Instead, we find a man on his knees, diaphoretic, begging for there to be some other way. Emotions are good. Emotions are human! If the Lord Jesus, the model for all humanity, can be seen weeping and sweating at the prospect of obeying God's will, then so can we.

When we see injustice in the world, or right in front of us, and it makes us feel miserable, that can be completely appropriate. Jesus shows us more, though. Emotions are good, but like any good thing, they can be used sinfully. After his strong emotional reaction, Jesus could have disobeyed, or worse still blamed God and lashed out. Instead, he surrendered to God's will and did what his Father asked of him.

angry injustice

When the one per cent pay rise for nurses was announced during 2020, the air turned blue at nursing stations all around the hospital. After the events of COVID-19, the public sector pay freeze and everything else, it seemed completely unfair to them. Many spouted abuse towards the government, often against the Prime Minister or the Health Secretary specifically. Many nicknames were coined, most of them unprintable in reputable media.

Without getting overly political or taking sides, I could have had two main responses. As a brand-new FY1 it would have been amazingly easy to join in as a show of solidarity, aiming to win the favour of my nursing colleagues. Or I could have been completely passive and said nothing. Yes, I would not have curried

favour, but at least I would not have been abusing those whom God has placed in government over us.

I soon became persuaded that neither approach was right. Instead, I tried gently to tone down the level of vitriol and return the conversation to calmer waters. Matthew 5:9 shows that the Prince of Peace values those who try and bring peace to situations – 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'.

all injustice

I have focused so far on reaction; now let me finish by talking about action. What do we do about injustice? Is it enough simply to react appropriately?

Of course not. We should seek to eliminate it where we can. If you see somebody being treated unfairly, step in and stop it happening. If you have some income that is yours to spend as you wish, give away a portion to charities that aim to reduce injustices in this world. As doctors, it can be a huge witness simply to take all patients seriously; you will find many clinicians to be jaded and dismissive of certain psychiatric and medical conditions.

But where is the Christian difference? Any decent person would do these things, and any decent doctor would treat all their patients equitably. Again, the answer lies with Jesus. When he arrived in a world filled with injustice, he left the picket sign at home. Instead, he invited some fishermen to travel with him preaching the gospel, healing the sick and calling their listeners to repentance.

More importantly than anything else, we must pray for the world, pray for those who suffer, and spread the gospel wherever we are able to. We should make the maximum difference we can and lift it all up to God. When we do that, we can let go and we will be filled with peace and joy.

Well, you would be, wouldn't you? ■

REFS

1. John 11:35

2. John 11:33

3. Luke 22:44