

Just Dinner 30/1/18- The Family: Everyday Christians and Periods

The evening focused on exploring:

- A) Whether the various issues within the topic of periods can be considered a genuine justice issue, and**
- B) What Christians can have to say to the secular secular conversation on the issue**

Esther's introduction

Esther outlined her journey with 'menstrual justice'. She gave an overview of the issues that fit under this banner:

- In our culture and across the world conversation on menstruation is often avoided. We grow up learning that periods are not a palatable conversation topic, that we are to keep our experiences to ourselves and that we are not to ask questions of others. We often receive inadequate education on menstruation and this results in women and girls fearing their own bodies and in boys struggling to support their female friends well.
- Beneath this silence and stigma, we've marginalised a whole host of serious issues:
 - In the UK and abroad women struggle to deal with their periods and therefore resort to overusing disposable pads, socks, newspapers, leaves, mud etc. This leads to infections, missing school and therefore compromising futures.
 - In the UK and abroad women become amputees as a result of Toxic Shock Syndrome caused by tampons. Stricter guidelines and better products may have been put in place had we not silenced the topic of menstruation for so long.
 - In the UK and abroad, we throw heaps of plastic away in the form of disposable pads and tampons and we know that this affecting our planet. There are alternatives, but often the silence surrounding conversation stops us from exploring options like menstrual cups and reusable pads as easily as we might otherwise be able to.
- Yet, in this reality, we are a people called to live in community and so we should know about the experiences of our brothers and sisters and we should care about them, no concerns of our family should be marginalised. We are a people called to live life to the full and see the flourishing of others and so we should react against problems that prevent them from doing this. We are a people called to recognise the dignity and value set by our creator in us and in other humans so we shouldn't be scared or ashamed of talking about our own bodies. So is this a genuine issue for Christians? Let's explore together.

Passages and articles

The following passages and articles were discussed in groups:

Shame

Passage: Psalm 139:13-16

Article 1:

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-photo-campaign-to-end-period-shame_us_5963c8e7e4b0911162fc2e1a

Article 2: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/banished_for_bleeding

Thoughts from the planning group...

The Bible tells us 'we are fearfully and wonderfully made'; that God's work in us is WONDERFUL. And yet, women still feel ashamed of what is a completely natural part of their body functions. There are many explanations for why this may be. Blood is a sign of something gone wrong with our bodies when we are sick or injured and this may be why periods have traditionally been seen as something unnatural and unhealthy- a culture that still perpetuates today.

We don't talk openly about menstruation- there's entire terminology we use to discuss periods that ranges from the ordinary 'time of the month' to the outright odd 'strawberry week' and 'grandma arriving in the red car'. We call these things euphemisms - things to make something 'blunt' and 'unpleasant' less harsh. What would the Bible make of this? This passage says to me that the human body is WONDERFULLY made, and I truly don't think God made mistakes when He created us the way we are. God carefully put our beautiful bodies together - he would never intend us to feel ashamed of them!

Not only this, but the shame that comes with periods is damaging. The story of menstrual huts around the world, the irrational fear of period blood- what does all this do to women? How does it make them feel towards themselves, and what damaging attitudes does it result in, in everyday life? The devil comes to steal and destroy- part of this is giving us shame which destroys self confidence, and robs us of life to the full. I don't believe that shame is ever something God intended us to feel, and as Christians we should have God's heart for others- which means ensuring they are full of life, love and dignity.

Education

Passage: Leviticus 15:16-24

Article 1:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/girls-teenagers-start-period-menstruation-education-womens-health-betty-for-schools-a7636246.html>

Article 2:

<https://www.devex.com/news/sanitary-pads-and-school-attendance-the-numbers-and-what-they-mean-87748>

Thoughts from the planning group...

Leviticus 15 might initially seem like an unusual passage to focus given that at first sight it seems to give a pretty damning account of menstruation!

There are of course a few things we need take into account in order to understand the context of the passage.

Firstly, in this chapter, God gives Moses laws concerning discharges that apply to both men and women, this is not just a women-only law, but rather one concerning purity for both genders in Israel.

Secondly, we of course know that we no longer hold to the cultural practices given to the Israelites and so this practice of purity no longer needs to be held in place.

What therefore might this passage say about how we should think about menstruation? Its interesting that God gives Moses and Aaron these instructions and that they are communicated to the community at large. They are not whispered to a woman to inform other women about, just in case Moses and Aaron feel embarrassed or shocked! Instead, talking about women's periods is just a part of everyday life for the community and therefore something that can be addressed as a family.

For me, this passage shows that menstruation should be an issue for all of us. We want those in our community to be healthy, to be able to look after their bodies and to flourish. In order to do this it is important that we know how periods work, how to look after our own bodies in menstruation and how best to care for others. God does not present menstruation to Moses as something that should be shameful or whispered about and we should also let menstruation be something that we talk about openly but with sensitivity so that people are not ashamed, scared or confused. It is important that this is a central issue for all so that all can live healthily, with dignity and without fear.

Poverty

Passage: 1 Cor 12:22-27; Luke 10:30- 37

Article 1:

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/17/girls-from-poorer-families-in-england-struggle-to-afford-sanitary-protection>

Article 2:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jan/05/having-a-period-is-unaffordable-in-kenya-yet-no-one-wants-to-talk-about-it>

Thoughts from the planning team...

As Christians, the dignity of other humans should be of the highest importance to us. When the Samaritan goes to the otherside of the road, he sees that his neighbour's safety, health and dignity are his own concern. So too Paul's picture of community in 1 Corinthians involves those who have 'less dignity' being given honour and care. According to Paul, if there members of our community are suffering, we are all suffering and therefore the trials of a few are the concern of everyone. If this is our response to the struggles of those in our

community, as we look out to the wider world, we should also have the same stance, suffering alongside those who struggle.

When it comes to period poverty therefore, this is a concern for us all. We acknowledge that humans should have dignity, the means to keep clean and healthy and attend education. The articles show that periods are a barrier to these rights both in the UK and globally. Girls are unable to flourish, unable to join in with society because they are struggling to deal with menstruation. This is an issue for everyone. It seems to me that the Bible asks us not to ignore the problems of our community. We therefore cannot ignore the struggles of these girls, we cannot refrain from open and honest conversation regarding menstruation, we have to address this and ensure that our family is safe, healthy and free from fear.

Discussion groups

We split into discussion groups to talk about different aspects of periods. Some helpful links to some of the things we looked at:

- Get your reusable pads and cups at <http://www.honouryourflow.co.uk/>
- More reusables here, plus other ways to support women in low income in the UK <https://www.nomoret taboo.org/>
- If you're really interested in menstruation, like the following page to get updates on everything that's going on. Do also get in touch with Esther Platt to be involved further in menstrual health. https://www.facebook.com/pg/MenstrualHealthHub/posts/?ref=page_internal.

If you'd like to learn more about what happened at Just Dinner, to get involved more with menstrual health or to continue the conversation get in touch with Esther Platt either by facebook or esther.platt233@gmail.com.