Reflections for preachers

This is a series of short reflections on some key Old and New Testament passages that help us focus on disability, identity and the church. They are offered as background reading for preachers who want to explore a biblical approach to disability and inclusion, and those who are interested in discovering a theology of liberation and freedom for disabled people

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1. The image of God.

Genesis 1:26-28

The creation myths that we read at the beginning of Genesis are the record of an ancient civilisations attempt to place their experience of life in a context. This ancient oral tradition, told and retold by many generations before it appeared in its written form, seeks to explain the experience of life in all of its variety for both individuals and the community. Although we can apply the terms myth and metaphor to these ancient writings, the one thing we cannot do is to dismiss them as untrue as, just like parables, they are founded on deeper truths than the stories themselves. Cosmology, Geology and Evolutionary science now make it impossible to deny that the universe is anything but some 13.7 billion years old, that it has evolved from some sort of incomprehensible explosion of energy that today still echoes across the vastness of space, and that humankind’s tenure of the planet we call earth is just a recent ‘blip’ in the total evolutionary story that has gone before, and is continuing all around us. Today we cannot read Genesis chapter 1 and 2 as literal descriptions of events, but we can read them as truthful accounts of meaning. The meaning and truth of a God who purposed creation, knows it, loves it, and proclaims its goodness.

At the heart of Genesis chapter 1 is a moment whose significance rises above the rest of the story.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-28)

However it happened, a moment of creation or millions of years of evolution, is irrelevant. What is important is the belief expressed in these words: ‘Let us make Man in our image, in our likeness.’ The belief that beyond all other creatures, humankind is given something extra. Something unique and special. Somehow humankind is made to be in the ‘image of God.’ This first man that we are introduced to is presented as in some way an embodiment of the God that has created him. He is made in the creator’s image in some way. Somehow he represents God and in that representation it must be that God can also be seen in and through him.

Understanding what this means is particularly important when it comes to beginning to understand disability. The implication of Genesis 1 and 2 is that Adam and then Eve are archetypical human beings. They are able bodied, rational (even if not always sensible), active people from whom the human race has flowed. The question is, is this what is meant by ‘the image of God?’ Is this human ideal what reflects the image of God and, if so, what does that say about those who are different? What does it say about and to those who do not conform to this archetypical norm?

The key to beginning to unpack this is to reflect on what we understand of God from these chapters. And maybe the first and most important understanding to highlight is that God is not a life form as we know it. God is not ‘knowable’ in the way that we can know our fellow human beings. God is not identifiable as we experience identity. The God we are presented with is not human, he is not ‘embodied’ as we understand this from our human perspective. He (although even using the male pronoun is problematic) is not walking around the unformed universe with a beating heart and blood coursing through his veins. Our struggle as human beings though, from the perspective of our existence in this material, three dimensional world, is to understand what this means.

In Genesis 2, we read:

‘The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.’ (Genesis 2:7)

The breath of life, the ruach, the ‘Spirit of God’ fills this mud moulded shape and ‘the man became a living being.’ And this is where the ‘image of God’ is focussed, in the breath of life. It is not that Adam was modelled on God, head, arms, body, legs etc in some archetypical way. God is not human and does not share our human embodiment or functionality. Yes, God sees, but not as we know it. He hears, but not as we know it. He moves, but not as we know it. He feels and tastes and smells, but not as we know it. He speaks, but not as we know it. He thinks, but not as we know it. Clearly the creator God of Genesis, the God of the Bible is profoundly ‘other’ but in his otherness has planted something of himself, his image, within humankind.

The Hebrew word that is translated as ‘image’ in Genesis 1:27 is Tselem. Its meaning is not image in the sense of replica but rather ‘shadow.’ A shadow of course has no substance but does convey identity and even character, so this suggests that what is planted in Adam and Eve is not a material likeness but some sort of inner, spiritual likeness. A likeness that is then reflected out into creation through something that is more intrinsic to our human heritage rather than physicality. ‘

This is an essential foundation on which to build a theological understanding of disability, but it has far more far reaching implications than just disability. It tells us that wherever the ‘breath of life’ is found in a human being, there is the Tselem, the image or shadow of God. No matter what a person’s appearance might be, no matter what their limitations – their abilities or disabilities - might be, no matter if a person can interact, think rationally, live productively or if they live in a state of total uninteractive dependence, the image of God is still present in the life that is being lived with each beat of a heart and each breath that is taken. Human life of itself, regardless of what a person can or cannot do, regardless of what a person can or cannot understand, is endowed with Tselem, the image or shadow of God. Within this understanding as well, we might be able to argue that people who see, hear, speak, touch, taste and move in different ways to the accepted norm have the potential to connect us more directly to the otherness of God. The God who sees with no eyes, hears with no ears, speaks with no vocal cords, thinks with no brain, touches with no fingers, moves with no legs, tastes with no tongue, is brought vividly into focus by those who live their lives differently from what is regarded as ‘normal.’

Our difficulty as human beings is in understanding or even vaguely grasping the idea of God’s ‘otherness.’ The Christian church has often fallen into the trap of seeking to forcibly embody God. The trap of seeking to create an image, a shape for God, of making God in our image rather than wrestling with the concept of the image of the otherness of God that is contained within all people. Maybe it is helpful to project the thought backwards in our human life cycle. In the creation narratives, Adam and Eve appear as mature adults. There is no pregnancy or gestation, no embryonic or infant development, no childhood, no adolescence. But for us there is, and we have to contemplate at what stage the idea of the image of God becomes a reality.

Psalm 139 contains these well-known words:

‘For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.’

(Psalm 139:13-16)

The Psalmist’s understanding is that God is involved at the very beginning of life, at the moment of conception. God is involved at the moment when a child has no form or shape, no human characteristics, no senses or skills, no ability to think or reason. But where God is involved, God is seen. His Spirit, his ruach or breath is the agent of creation and here in this unidentifiable human form, from its first moment of single cell life, God’s ruach, his creative power, is at work, bringing life into being and forming that life in his Tselem. Stamping his image or shadow even when life is at its smallest and most fragile.

The important thing to understand is that the human physical form or cognitive function is not the image of God because God does not have a body or a mind as we understand this. Our material, physical selves and our earth bound minds can in no way be a representation or image of God. But within each of us as human beings, from the very beginning of life, is a deeper and more intrinsic image. God’s Tselem, his shadow. An image or shadow that cannot be diminished or expanded no matter what our physical or mental shape, size, understanding, conformity or deformity, ability or disability might be.

1. God looks at the heart

1 Samuel 16:6-7

In 1 Samuel 16 we read of God’s call to Samuel to go and find and anoint the person who is to be the next King of Israel. King Saul no longer has God’s favour and Samuel is sent to the household of Jesse in Bethlehem where he has been told he will find the person to anoint as the next king. Jessie parades his sons before him, sure that the physical prowess, skills and abilities and good looks of one of them will qualify them for the job. But this is what we read:

 ‘When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, `Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."’ (1 Samuel 16:6-7)

Jesse makes seven of his sons pass before Samuel. Each one mature, strong, capable, and handsome, but God’s word to Samuel each time is that each of them is not the one. Eventually the youngest son is brought in, David. He is young, just a boy, the family shepherd, immature and at that moment far less qualified for the role of king than any of his brothers. But God’s word to Samuel is that he is the one.

“Rise and anoint him, he is the one.” (1 Samuel 16:12)

Yes, of course, David grew up and matured into a strong, capable, courageous, powerful, and attractive (but fallible) man who was well suited to the role of king, but God’s words to Samuel as he began this task are deeply significant as we think about disability.

The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

Clearly Samuel had a picture in his mind of what a King looked like. Tall, athletic, good looking, authoritative. He was full of preconceptions and unconscious bias towards a person who would fit the image he had brought with him. What he didn’t expect was to find himself anointing a boy, a shepherd, a player of harps, singer of songs and writer of poetry. The youngest son fresh from the fields with the characteristic smell and dirt that comes from spending your life with sheep clinging to him. But God is an expectation, pre-conception shattering God. A God who looks at the heart not at the outward appearance. A God who wants to shatter the limits that others would place on us and allow us to grow into the fullness that he knows is our true destiny. No one in his family knew it, and Samuel struggled to understand it, but the shepherd boy David, despite all expectations being that he would remain the family shepherd while his older brothers were the family achievers, found that his limits were suddenly expanded beyond sheep and goats and pasture in his role as king David.

‘So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power.’ (1 Samuel 16:13)

As well as an encouragement for disabled people, this comes as a challenge to the church. God sees the heart, but is that what the church sees? Too often physical appearance and ability and imposed barriers and limits are allowed to stifle the hearts that God may be seeing and calling to be a blessing to his church. A significant challenge for us is to recognise the hearts that beat with faith within the bodies and minds of disabled people. The hearts of faith beating in those who do not conform to the ministry stereotype. Those that bishops never imagined they would find themselves laying hands on, anointing, and ordaining to the service of God. Is the church seeing what God sees – the heart? Or has the church squeezed God out and created its own narrow area of normalcy that demands conformity rather than allows true diversity.

1. I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh and the suffering servant

Joel 2 and Isaiah 53

The prophet Joel is speaking to God’s people through a time of crisis and national disaster. Vast plagues of locusts have invaded the land and the crops are ruined. Food is scarce for people and animals. There is great distress and suffering. But Joel 2 brings a message of hope. This time is coming to an end. As the people repent and turn to the Lord, they will know blessing and provision once again. But in this prophecy the blessing goes beyond food and provision as we read:

 “And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” (Joel 2:28-29)

As Christians we of course read this as a prophecy of the Pentecost event recorded in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples and then the early church. It is without a doubt a limit busting prophecy. The Spirit will come on ‘all people,’ sons, daughters, old men and young men. The young and the old, the educated and uneducated, the wise and the foolish, the articulate and the stutterer, the important and unimportant, the regarded and disregarded, the able and the disabled. All people will be filled with the Spirit in this new outpouring and breaking and stretching of preconceptions and limits.

This is the prophecy of the breaking open of holiness, the sweeping away of the Old Testament metaphors of Temple and sacrifice with their rules and regulations and the radical inclusion of all people in an experience of holiness that flows directly from God. Alongside the many other passages of inclusion and blessing in the Old Testament –Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:6-7; 42:16; 43:5-8; Jeremiah 31:8-9 and more – this brings a message of liberation and inclusion for all people, able and disabled. It is fitting that it is the note on which the Old Testament comes to an end (although it is not the last book in our Bibles of course). A note of promise and expectation. A note of liberation and equality for all. A note of expectation that God’s people held onto for 500 years in anticipation of what might be to come.

However, it comes with a caveat. It comes framed within the prophecies of Isaiah about the Messiah and particularly framed by the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Key to this outpouring and central to this new relationship will be a moment of disability. Disability through which the depth and wonder of God will be fully revealed. Disability that will mark God with wounds that can never be erased and will stand as an invitation to all who are injured and broken and disabled to enter the fullness of life.

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:11)

The Gospels invite us to see how the Christ incarnate in Jesus becomes the wounded and disabled God. Disabled in the wounding of his flesh and finally disabled in his entering into death and his giving up of all bodily function. However, many centuries before this, the central importance of God becoming disabled is recognised in Isaiah’s prophecy. It is the wounded, disfigured, rejected and tortured God who brings life to all as metaphor comes to an end and holiness flows directly from the pierced heart of God to all of his people.,

1. Disabled people in the Old Testament

One of the striking things about the Old Testament is how many of the significant characters struggle from time to time with life and faith. Many are recorded as facing issues of mental and physical health that expose an inherent human weakness at the very heart of the stories that we read. As we read about Moses and his speech impediment, Jacob and his injured hip, Saul’s severe mental illness, David’s tendency to sink into depression, Elijah’s ‘bi-polar’ character, Job’s sickness and affliction, as well as the blindness of Isaac, Jacob, Samuel and Samson, we begin to see that the Biblical narrative offers a unique perspective in that it does not try to hide or gloss over what could be judged to be the weaknesses of its main characters, but rather uses these characteristics to focus on God’s ability to act and bring his purpose into being, despite human weakness and struggle. The disabilities and limits of all of these characters is essential to the unfolding of God’s will and purpose and the on-going story of salvation that threads its way through both Old and New Testaments. Often their disability and limits are the ground for revelatory encounters with God that reveal truth that, without this perspective, would not have been revealed. It is certainly true that God does not regard many characteristics that we would label today as disabilities as prohibiting involvement in his plan and purpose for his people.

1. Why does Jesus heal and the parable of the great feast.

Jesus’ healings are proof of what lies at the heart of the Gospel. They are what say to the sick and disabled and all who are excluded and marginalised, ‘there are no outsiders. All are included.’ The healings are radical acts of inclusion. Radical acts of recognition and welcome as those that were unseen are noticed, those that were disregarded are celebrated, and those that were rejected are welcomed. Was physical healing needed for this? No, not in any way. We diminish Jesus if we think that the only pathway he offered to inclusion was through physical healing. God is not so small as to need to heal us in order to include us. But when we use the word ‘healing’ in the church as we talk about Jesus’ ministry, we are in danger of missing the point. That is because the ‘healing’ that the sick and disabled and marginalised experience at the hands of Jesus is not the eradication of their physical, sensory or cognitive difference and their restoration to what the crowds would have called ‘normal.’ No, that aspect of the healing miracles is cure, the healing though is something else.

The woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:25-34 reveals this clearly for us. The woman comes silently and secretly to Jesus, reaching out to touch his robe and finding that in so doing her bleeding stops, she is cured. But Jesus knows there is more to this than just cure, there is healing yet to come. There is more to give her than just her physical cure and, as she eventually identifies herself to Jesus and the crowd, he says: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

The paralysed man lowered through the roof (Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26) demonstrates this as well, but in reverse. ‘Your sins are forgiven’ is the moment of his healing; ‘Get up and walk’ is the moment of his cure. In fact, there are many people that Jesus encounters who are healed, they are brought from the margins into the centre of the kingdom, without any cure. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) for example could be said to be disabled by his small stature, but his moment of healing in Jesus’ words: ‘this man too is a son of Abraham,’ does not come with any change in the circumstances that cause him so much disadvantage. He is as short a man after his healing as he was before his encounter with Jesus. And as we explore the Gospels, we encounter others who are healed of marginalisation and stigmatisation and are brought from the margins into the centre of the kingdom without any physical cure taking place. The woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in the home of Simon the Leper (Matthew 26:6-13), the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob’s well (John 4), and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), are all brought from the margins to the centre of the kingdom and receive the healing of restoration and renewal with no mention of any physical cure or change.

John Hull comments:

‘There has been a great deal of discussion of the significance for disabled people of the healing miracles of Jesus. We must not allow the way our culture has conditioned us into normality to mislead us. It would be easy for us to think that Jesus took the distorted, abnormal people and normalised them, making them like everyone else. We should, rather, understand that the welcome Jesus extended to marginalised people, whether because of their occupation, their social status or their impairments, was an experience of healing. He healed people by helping them to escape the ritual taboos which marked them out as impure, by restoring them to the communities from which they had been banished, by eating and drinking with them when no one else would even touch them, and by restoring them to life in all its fullness. In many cases this healing process was accompanied by a cure, but it is the healing that we should emphasise, because it was being healed that saved them.’

(John Hull, Disability, An Inclusive Church Resource, Darton, Longman & Todd 2013 p87)

In Jesus’ ministry the cure is important as an outward sign of the new kingdom that he has come to proclaim and a sign of the deeper healing that is taking place. Cure has a purpose, but Jesus shows us clearly that there is healing and freedom beyond cure. Although in the majority of accounts of Jesus healing miracles these two elements are conflated into one experience, the cure of sickness or disability, and the healing, or we could say rehabilitation, of the person to a new place of inclusion and freedom and belonging are both evident.

We must not ignore the challenges of this though. For many disabled people the biblical emphasis on healing as physical cure is problematic. It does seem that Jesus wanted disability to go away. It does seem that he wanted to erase disability from amongst his followers and disciples. The question is asked: ‘could a disabled person have been a disciple or follower of Jesus?’

If Bartimaeus had remained blind, could he still have ‘followed Jesus along the road?’ Mark 10:46-52) If Mary Magdalene had remained in her disturbed state of mind, could she have been as close to Jesus as she was and still been the first to see the risen Jesus? (John 20:16) If the man born blind had remained blind, could the work of God still have been revealed in his life? (John 9:3) It is a fundamental question that blind theologian John Hull askes: ‘Could I have been blind and been a disciple with Jesus and, if there are no people that model being disabled followers in the Gospels, can I be blind and a disciple of Jesus today??

(John Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness* (SCM Press, 2001), p160.

It is a challenge that calls us to consider carefully how we read and interpret the Gospel accounts of healing miracles and how we then contextualise these in the broader themes and teachings of the Gospel. It is easily possible to push disabled people into marginal and isolated places where personal doubt can be stirred and faith weakened if the miracles of healing are dealt with insensitively.

The parable of the Great Feast in Luke 14:16-24 is key to understanding how disability fits into Jesus teaching and ministry. Jesus tells the story of a king who prepares a banquet for his friends but, on finding that they turn down his invitation, sends his servants to the streets and alleys of the town and the highways and byways in the countryside to bring in the poor and sick and disabled instead. The parable draws a picture of the poor and disabled entering the kingdom banquet as they are, with crutches, wheelchairs, guide dogs, white sticks, hearing aids, Down’s Syndrome, Autism, and the rest. But it is not that they are suddenly cured as they cross the kingdom threshold. No, their disabilities go with them into the kingdom. But healing does take place as they are absorbed into the new relationship of grace that is at the heart of the kingdom and each of their disabilities in some way become part of what the kingdom of God is. In the miracles of Jesus the outsiders and marginalised of Jewish society are brought into the centre and seated in the places of honour and the healing that is at the heart of the radical, counter cultural nature of the new kingdom begins to be revealed.

1. The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2

The acts of the Apostles opens with the drama of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples and the foundations of the kingdom that Jesus spent his ministry proclaiming, the kingdom where the last will be first and the least the greatest, are laid in the embryonic early church. As the Old Testament came to an end with the words of the prophet Joel: ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh’, so on this day this prophecy came to completion. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the apostles and the wider group of disciples gathered in Jerusalem and the Christian church is born with a moment of radical inclusion that sweeps up old and young, men and women, parents and children, and people of many different nationalities, backgrounds and languages, into a shared experience of grace and blessing. There are no barriers to this inclusion. 3,000 people come to faith in a day, hearing and experiencing the good news in their own language. Amos Yong, in his book ‘The Bible, Disability and the Church,’ offers what he calls a reading of this event from a ‘disability Hermeneutic.’ By this he stresses the multi-sensory nature of the experience. There are visual, audible, and physical signs – wind and fire - along with inspired speaking and hearing.

There may well be ‘visions,’ as Joel prophesied. There is the body language of excitement and amazement. There are facial expressions and actions that convey the wonder of what is happening. In short, he proposes:

‘The linguistic and cultural inclusiveness urged by the Day of Pentecost narrative can be expanded to include people with a diversity of disabilities. The Holy Spirit manifests the wondrous works of God through many tongues and many different senses.’’

(Amos Yong, The Bible Disability and the Church, A new vision of the people of God, p80)

The Day of Pentecost was a multi-sensory experience that reached out to everyone regardless of any physical, sensory, or cognitive disability. Everyone was able to connect with what was happening and experience the good news that was being shared, and, as Acts 2 tells us: ‘Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day’ (v41). Even from today’s statistics we would assume that close to 600 of these people may have had disabilities. In the first century Roman world this is likely to have been higher. The church is born into a state of radical inclusion. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor, servant and master, recognised and marginalised, able and disabled, are invited and accepted into this new multi-sensory community of grace.

1. Paul and disability

Paul’s letters do not highlight sickness or disability as a negative issue for the early church. However, much of his teaching about discipleship and our relationship with God through Jesus is founded on the central theme of ‘weakness.’ On the idea that things that from a human perspective make us weak and restrict us – sickness, disability, persecution, imprisonment – are in fact vehicles for God’s strength and power to be made evident in our lives and the world. He boasts in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:6) and shares the revelation from God that ‘God’s power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). He even expresses his desire to suffer so as to share in the sufferings of Christ in order to ‘somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead’ (Philippians 3:10-11).

What is most significant is that it is clear from his writing that Paul regarded himself as having some sort of permanent or recurring weakness or disability. He talks about his weakness in terms of its physical consequences in several passages. He claims that he is not an eloquent speaker or an impressive person. He came to the Corinthians in ‘fear and trembling and not with ‘eloquence or superior wisdom’ (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He writes about being a ‘fool for Christ’ (1 Corinthians 4:10),’ wearing his weaknesses on the outside and not attempting to hide them. In fact, boasting about his weaknesses in order to reveal God’s strength at work in him (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:9). And finally claiming that it is in his weakness that he is strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

It seems that there is something about his appearance and speaking that conveys the impression of weakness. Paul himself reports criticisms levelled against him: ‘For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing"’ (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Simon Home suggests that the word often translated ‘weakness’ – astheneiai – could in some contexts more appropriately be translated as ‘inability.’ It is used in other places as a direct reference to disabled people and to their impairments e.g. Acts 4:9, Luke 13:11. He points out that Paul often contrasts ‘astheneiai’ with ‘dunamis’ a word whose primary meaning is ‘ability. In this context translating ‘astheneiai’ as ‘inability’ seems legitimate. He comments:

‘In two verses, Paul makes several paradoxical statements about inabilities in which astheneiai and dunamis are contrasted (II Corinthians 12:9-10). First, God has spoken to him directly, saying, “My power is made complete, (is fulfilled) in inability (dunamis en astheneia teleitai).” Second, Paul will boast all the more in his inabilities, ”that the power of Christ may rest upon me,” and for the sake of Christ, Paul is content with his inabilities, as with other difficulties that result from his discipleship, for ”When I lack ability, then I am able.”’

(Simon Home, “Those who are blind see,” in Disability and the service of God, Reassessing religious practice, ed. Eiesland and Saliers, p93)

This gives us a greater insight into what Paul is meaning by the use of the words weak and weakness, particularly when referring to himself. It adds weight to the proposal that his ‘weakness’ is in fact a physical or sensory disability, a condition that in some way restricts or limits him. It is though ambiguous as to what this issue might be. Referring back to 2 Corinthians 10:10 we might speculate that it could be some sort of bodily deformity – a stoop or hunch or scoliosis or maybe just small stature. Or possibly a speech defect – maybe a stutter or cleft palate. We know that Paul could talk for a long time, as in Acts 20:7ff when he spoke through the night and Acts 19:9-10 when he has daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus for 2 years, but was this because he had a lot to say or because it took him a long time to communicate clearly? In Acts 17:18 we are told those who heard him in Athens said: "What is this babbler trying to say?" Is he ‘babbling’ because his ideas are hard to relate to or his speech difficult to understand?

‘Paul’s response is to point out that it is precisely because of his ‘weakness’ or ‘inability’ that the Gospel is so powerfully preached.

‘My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power’ (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

And in 2 Corinthians 4 he draws the analogy of himself and those who work with him as being like clay jars, unimpressive in their outward appearance, yet containing treasure:

‘But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us’ (2 Corinthians 4:7).

1. A thorn in the flesh

2 Corinthians 12

This is then focussed in a well-known passage in 2 Corinthians 12:

‘To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Or using Simon Home’s translation – ‘” My power is fulfilled in inability.’ (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Whether Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ is linked with the weaknesses or inabilities that attract the criticism reported in 2 Corinthians 10:10 or something different is unclear. Two things suggest this is something different. First, he seems to be disclosing something to the Corinthians that he has been ‘given’ and that they do not already know about, along with the fact that he had prayed three times for it to be taken away, whereas his more obvious and widely known ‘weaknesses’ would have been very familiar to them. And secondly, he clearly thought and hoped that this condition could be healed. Whatever his other issues are it seems they have been with him for a long time. They are weaknesses that he makes it clear he had come to terms with and saw as gift in his proclamation of the Gospel. So this suggests that his ‘thorn in the flesh’ is something different and new.

Many think it might be something to do with failing sight as he often takes care to make it clear that he does not scribe his letters himself but has someone else do it for him and when he does write his name he does it in large letters (Galatians 6:11). There could be further clues to suggest this in Galatians where he writes:

‘As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.’ (Galatians 4:13-15)

This may be Paul in metaphorical mode, emphasising the lengths to which the Galatians went to care for him and enable his ministry, or he may be speaking about his failing sight, we cannot be sure. What we can be sure of though is that Paul is suffering an affliction that is debilitating in some way and, as he says, keeps him from becoming conceited about the great revelations he has seen and the power of God he has experienced at work through him.’ But a weakness through which God is glorified in his life - ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong’ or ‘When I lack ability then I am able’ (2 Corinthians 12:10). Healing is not needed because God’s grace is sufficient, and in Paul’s disabled yet grace-filled life God’s power and glory are seen all the more.

1. The Pauline church

1 Corinthians 12

In a very real way this could be the motto of the early church – ‘when I am weak, I am strong’ or ‘power made perfect in weakness.’ After the persecution that followed Stephen’s death (Acts 8:1) and the scattering of the believers from Jerusalem across Judea and Samaria, the church was fragmented into small isolated communities, weakened and needing to be secretive much of the time. As Peter and then Paul preached the Gospel to the gentiles the Christian communities that formed were also small and often weak. Often persecuted and pushed to the margins of society. This early Christian church is not a strong movement that can boast wealth and influence, but it is, as Paul says, a church in which God’s strength is made perfect in their weakness as they ‘shine like stars in the universe and hold out the word of life’ (Philippians 2:15-16).

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul draws his well-known picture of the church as a body.

 ‘The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.’ (1 Corinthians 12:12)

His picture of a body made up of stronger and weaker parts, presentable and less presentable parts, visible and hidden parts, evokes an interesting image of early church communities. He writes:

‘God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (1 Corinthians 12:24-25)

This is a vision of the church as a ‘corporate’ entity. Corporate being a word with its roots in the Latin ‘Corpus,’ meaning body. A community in which all, regardless of gifting or restriction, wealth or poverty, maturity or naivety, ability or disability, weakness or strength, combine to make a unique ‘whole’ whose identity and function requires all its members in all of their variety and diversity in order to be complete. The context of Paul’s body image is then completed with these words: ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.’ (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The concept of the ‘Body of Christ’ draws us to the image of the risen Christ holding out his nail torn hands to Thomas and showing him the mark of the spear in his side. The Body of Christ is an injured body, a broken body, a body that is weak and disabled, but through that weakness, strong and glorious. In this way, as Paul teaches and models for us, the bodies injuries, it’s broken and disabled bodies and minds, are essential to the formation of a holistic representation of Jesus. Without the brokenness, the open wounds, the challenge of pain and disfigurement and disability, the church is impoverished and incomplete. A church that shies away from these things, that does not welcome disabled people and is hesitant to join in the radical inclusion that is at the heart of Jesus ministry and the church from its earliest moment, is a church that is inevitably hollow. A church that is running after old covenant holiness in a striving for perfection rather than reflecting the broken and vulnerable and challenging holiness of the new covenant. It will inevitably be a church that looks great on the outside but lacks the real substance of the broken and risen Christ that we encounter in Jesus.

1. The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews is instrumental in moving the church’s understanding on from the old covenant of the Mosaic law and temple worship to the new covenant brought about through Jesus. The writer uses the metaphor of the temple, the role of priests and the sacrifices to articulate Jesus role as the ‘author of salvation’ (Hebrews 2:10). Jesus’ human life, his temptation and suffering are key to this. He lived as we live, yet lived in purity despite all he experienced, so opening the way by which we can move from the imperfection of this life to share the perfection of Jesus in the next. So the writer can say:

‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are- yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.’ (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Jesus as priest and sacrifice has ‘sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven,’ (Hebrews 8:1) taking into the very centre of God the scars of his crucifixion and the signs and experience of his suffering. Once again, here we can find the image of the disabled Christ, risen and yet scarred, healed and yet broken, almighty and yet carrying our weakness. The scarred and broken Christ who invites all who are scarred and broken to ‘approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

1. Revelation – The new creation

From the perspective of the disability conversation the major question asked of the Book of Revelation is about the nature of our new, redeemed bodies. In the new heaven and earth, when there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, when every tear has been wiped from our eyes (Revelation 21:4) what will the experience of those who live this life with disabilities be. Is the life to come an experience when all people are conformed to a single model, transformed into what God has specified as a state of perfection? Or will there be variety, just as there is in this life? Wil personality, character, gifts, skills, talents, experience, memory still exist in some way or will this all be wiped away with our tears as death and mourning and crying and pain come to an end?

The God we see in Genesis 1 and 2 is a God of infinite variety. He is a God who enjoys variety, encourages it, rejoices in it, and calls it good. Could we ever imagine that this God would eliminate variety in the new heaven and new earth? It would seem a nonsense to even consider. The new heaven and earth is surely an opportunity for greater variety. An opportunity for God to be even more imaginative, even more creative, even more daring, if that were possible. No, the thought that in the life to come we will all be conformed to a single standard that eliminates variety is preposterous. But the question is, is disability part of the new heaven and new earth diversity and variety and, if so, what does that mean for disabled people? As Roy McCloughry remarks:

‘I don’t see that living in a ’New World’ with my impaired brain and the possibility that I will have a seizure at any moment is anything to write home about.’’

(Roy McCloughry, The Enabled Life, p71)

For all disabled people though their experience has helped form their character, often been foundational to gifts and talents they have developed, been influential in shaping the nature of their relationships and often been key to moments of revelation and understanding that without their unique perspective would not have been achieved. We know that our life to come will be life without suffering and pain, but that does not mean that the unique perspectives, abilities, and experiences of people who have lived with disabilities in this life will be lost as well.

At the centre of the book of Revelation is the person of Christ. He is represented in two ways, as a victorious lion and as a lamb that resembles ‘one who has been slain’ (Revelation 5:5-6). Jesus has taken the marks of crucifixion, his wounded hands and feet and side and head, into the glory of heaven, and here, in the ‘lamb who was slain’ we see those wounds redeemed and glorified. The wounds of Christ, the disabled lamb, no longer the wounds of death but now the wounds of life.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is answering just this question, what will our new bodies be like? He likens it to planting a seed. Each seed planted dictates the plant that grows. The plant is related to and springs out of the history of the seed. He says:

‘The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body’ (1

Corinthians 15:42-44).

So, although we are transformed in our lives to come, we are not unrelated to our experience of this life. What we sow and what is sown in us in this life in all of its variety and diversity will somehow be transformed and raised in our new, imperishable bodies. Maybe we will find our disabilities stay with us in our lives to come but in a transformed state. No longer the restrictive experiences that they are now, but somehow ‘made new’ (Revelation 21:5) to be experiences of liberation and connection with our God who bears the marks of disability.

Roy McCloughry comments:

‘Just as Christ still has the wounds in his hands in the New World, so we may still carry the hallmarks of our impairments but their significance will be transformed. Those who think of the New World as a place for ’normal’ people need to think again. In fact, this transformed community may be the very place where some people we have called ’disabled’ find that some of the characteristics that in this life society saw as marking them out as disabled remain. What has happened is that the community has changed so that those characteristics are no longer seen as ’a problem’ but can be celebrated.’’

(Roy McCloughry, The Enabled life, p71-72)

Paul writes in Romans:

‘For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.’

(Romans 8:29)

The risen and wounded Jesus calls us to follow him through this life and into the next. He calls us to live a cruciform life with all of its pain and unanswered questions. He calls us to hold our wounds, our disabilities in the context of the cross where the fullness of love and holiness are revealed. And he calls us to see in his risen wounded presence the redemption and transformation of every human experience as wounds become gift, ugliness beauty, and disabilities the very thing through which God’s glory is revealed. In making all things new, disability will be disabled and all will be included and honoured, held in the wounded hands of Jesus and set free.