



Strength made perfect  
Disability and the church

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## Leaders Pack

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## Strength made perfect Disability and the church

### **Session 1: What is disability?**

#### Leaders script

#### Welcome and introductions

If you are in a small group, spend some time introducing yourselves and sharing what you hope to get out of these sessions.

#### **Introduction**

This series of studies will help you begin to think about disability and the church. We will explore the social context of disability, what the Bible tells us about disability and disabled people, and then think about what the church might do today to be a place of equal belonging and participation for all.

Each session contains two or three reflections with a number of questions and a moment to hold all you have heard and shared before God. It is important in your discussions (if you are in a small group) that you make time and space for everyone to be heard. The stories, experiences and reflections of any group members who are disabled will be particularly valuable to the group.

These studies will hopefully cause you to begin to think in new ways, but it will not make you into a more open and accessible church. That is a far deeper process that you will need to commit yourself to over an extended period of time. But, as you hear of the injustice that disabled people experience and the church's failure to be truly open to all, along with the Gospel imperative to bring the marginalised into the centre, I hope you will be inspired to seek to become a church that recognises and lives out the truth that God's power is made perfect in weakness and that in God's kingdom, disability is a witness of grace that is essential to the Body of Christ.

#### **Disability today**

Disability is a common experience. Over 20% (1 in 5) of all people in the UK are disabled in some way. This is 7% of under 16s, 20% of working age people, and 45% of over 65s. And yet, although it is so common, many people who regard themselves as not disabled

say they are concerned, or even fearful, about meeting disabled people. In fact, 67% (more than 2 out of 3 people) say they are 'uncomfortable' about meeting disabled people.

Why might this be do you think?

Maybe you can relate to this statistic and share this feeling of unease about being with disabled people.

Or maybe you are disabled and have experienced what it is to be ignored or marginalised or passed by.

If you think you are not disabled, imagine for a moment that you are asked to accompany a disabled person on a journey. What would you think? What would you be worried about?

If you are disabled, think about how you feel when meeting strangers for the first time. What worries you and why? Maybe you have had good and bad experiences with other people.

Take a few moments as a group to share your thoughts and experiences.

## 1. What is disability?

The Equality Act that came into UK law in 2010 says that a person is disabled when they have:

'A physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term effect on their ability to perform day to day activities.'

14 million people in the UK identify as disabled in some way. It is estimated that of these, 70% (9.8 million) are hidden disabilities and 30% (4.2 million) are visible disabilities.

Hidden disabilities are often some form of mild to moderate learning disability, mental illness, restrictions due to diabetes, epilepsy, heart disease, respiratory conditions, and many other medical conditions that cannot be seen but restrict how a person can function in everyday life.

Visible disabilities are things that we might more traditionally think of as disabilities. Mobility issues, wheelchair users, physical deformities and injuries, blindness, Down's Syndrome and intellectual disabilities, etc.

7 million working age people are disabled. Half of these cannot work and half work or are seeking work. But unemployment amongst working disabled people is high at about 10% and wages for those that do work are often lower than those of their non disabled colleagues.

Many disabled people and their families are disadvantaged, Experiencing poor housing, low income, poor educational outcomes, lack of social mobility and reduced opportunities

compared to non disabled people. In 2018, 75% of people who accessed foodbanks were disabled or had disabled family members. Since 2010 government initiatives to 'control' welfare spending have seen disabled people targeted and further disadvantaged in different ways.

In 2017 Employment Support Allowance, the main out of work disability benefit, was reduced by almost £30 a week to align it with standard unemployment benefit. The replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with Personal Independence Payments (PIP) has seen many disabled people re-assessed for benefits and lose income even though their disability had not changed. And initiatives like the bedroom tax unfairly hit disabled people where extra living space is needed for wheelchairs and equipment.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission report (2017) 'Being disabled in Britain – a journey less equal,' states:

'It is a badge of shame on our society that millions of disabled people in Britain are still not being treated as equal citizens and continue to be denied the everyday rights non-disabled people take for granted, such as being able to access transport, appropriate health services and housing, or benefit from education and employment. The disability pay gap is persistent and widening, access to justice has deteriorated, and welfare reforms have significantly affected the already low living standards of disabled people. It is essential that as a society we recognise and address these structural problems urgently and comprehensively.'

Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have said: "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." If this is true, then the statistics and the experiences of disabled people in the UK today suggest that our society does not measure up well. Statistics and research reveal that as a nation we are not inclusive or compassionate towards many people who live with disabilities. Our achievement driven, wealth measured society does not value those who cannot take part in the race towards what is judged to be success. Disabled people are pushed to the margins of society, categorised, and denied the opportunities that those who fit society's definition of 'normal' enjoy as a matter of course.

All of this means that many disabled people are hidden in our midst. They are isolated at home with inadequate provision and low income that prohibit their engagement with wider society. Isolation results in loneliness and depression, which results in further isolation, and the cycle of marginalisation and disadvantage goes ever on.

## Questions

1. How does this make you feel?
2. If you are not disabled, have you ever thought that disability brings so much disadvantage and lack of opportunity?
3. If you are disabled, are you able to talk about the disadvantage you have experienced and how this has made you feel?

## 2. Models of disability

A number of what are known as 'models of disability' have been developed to help both disabled people and those who feel they are not disabled understand more about what disability really is. Different models have been developed at different times in the light of new thinking about how and why people are disabled.

### The Medical Model.

In 1845 the UK Parliament passed what was known as 'The Lunacy Act.' Although the purpose of the act was to speed up the segregation of disabled people in asylums (particularly those who were intellectually disabled or mentally ill), it was also the first time that disabled people were regarded as 'patients' in need of medical care rather than social rejects who needed to be locked away for their own and society's protection. Before this, disability had been regarded as a social problem. After this, it was regarded as a medical problem and it became the goal of the increasingly powerful medical profession to cure or correct physical, sensory and cognitive impairments in order to make disabled people as 'normal' as possible. This became known as the medical model of disability. It sees all disability as sickness that is in need of treatment and assumes that all disabled people want above everything else to be cured or normalised. It led, over the following 150 years, to disabled people being held in the grip of a powerful medical profession and losing any sense of self-determination. Disabled people had no voice and were not listened to and often subjected to prolonged and painful treatments that were of little benefit. They were often trapped in places of medical care for the whole of their lives with no say in what was done to them. And if medical intervention was not possible or did not have the desired effect, disabled people found themselves in a place of double rejection. Rejected by society and rejected by the medical profession. Often condemned to live in long-stay institutions for the whole of their lives.

### The social model

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century though a new model and understanding began to emerge. In the years after the Second World War, as many injured soldiers and service personnel returned to the UK, new groups of activists sprung up who demanded that disabled people should be as involved in building the new post-war society as the non-disabled. After all, many disabled service men and women had become disabled fighting for this new society. In the 1940s and 1950s, places of care were still being built where disabled people were detained under the guise of being cared for. But people began to condemn long-stay institutions as dehumanising and indefensible. In the 1960s the term 'disability rights' was coined, very much following the model of the fight for the rights of black people in the USA. And out of disability rights came a new understanding of disability, or a new model.

## The Social Model.

The social model stresses that a person's physical or sensory or cognitive impairment is not their disability. Disability occurs when society does not allow a person with an impairment to take a full part in that society because they are denied access and their full rights. People with impairments have many abilities, but they become disabled when those abilities are suppressed by a society that is structured only for people of a certain physical, sensory and cognitive shape. The shape that society has decided to call normal.

In the social model, disability is not countered or mitigated by medical intervention but by making social adjustments that make society as open and as accessible as possible to the full diversity of embodiment that is part of the human experience. It demands physical and material change and a fundamental change of attitude, demanding that impairments are not seen as deficit or deficiency

Many disabled people fought and campaigned hard for this recognition through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Campaigns that finally bore fruit when the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act came into force and subsequently the Equality Act in 2010. The Acts put disability rights into law and required a radical 'rewiring' of society, both the physical environment and people's attitudes, to accommodate this.

## The Minority Model

But although a blanket approach to disability did change things for all disabled people, this was patchy. Some disabilities were left behind and not recognised in the same way as others. Some changes suited and benefitted one type of disability while not benefitting another. So, a new model began to emerge, the minority model. In this disabled people are seen as minority clusters each with unique cultures, gifts, perspectives and needs. Just like other minorities, ethnic and social groups, different disabilities needed to be recognised and space made for them in society.

## What is wrong with models?

What is wrong with models though? Well really all these models, medical, social and minority, have one big fault. They all require disability to be defined as difference. They need a line to be drawn between the able and the disabled, but that line is always drawn by those who regard themselves as able. It is the able who define what disability is by deciding what makes a person normal and so defining what makes a person abnormal or disabled.

In all of these models, disability is a negative categorisation that indicates that a person has some sort of deficit. Something is missing or not right about them. Or in other words,

something has gone wrong. The question this course asks is: Is this right? Is disability something gone wrong, or is there something much more important here. Something that can tell us incredible things about God and creation and our place in all of this.

## Questions

1. Has looking at disability from a social model perspective changed your understanding of what disability is?
2. Do you find it surprising that many disabled people would not want to endure lengthy medical treatment in the hope of 'curing' or 'normalising' their body but would rather be allowed to live a full life as a disabled person?
3. What do you think are the barriers and attitudes society presents that cause 'disability,' excluding and inhibiting people whose bodies, senses and minds do not conform to what is called 'normal' from playing a full part in society?

## Time to reflect

Next time we will explore some Old Testament passages and particularly the story of creation in which God says: Let us make man in our image. Let's make them, male and female.

What we will ponder is how the image of God is seen in the full diversity of humanity, and particularly what we can see of God in disabled people.

We will end this session though with a brief reflection on Psalm 8.

## Psalm 8

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.  
From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise  
because of your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.  
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
What are we that you are mindful of us,  
our children that you care for them?  
You made us a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned us with glory and honour.  
You made us rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under our feet:  
all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

At the centre of this Psalm, in verses 4 and 5, we read that God is mindful of us and cares for us, and we have been crowned with glory and honour. There is no caveat to this revelation. It does not say, 'you are mindful of some of us and care about some of us and crown some of us with glory and honour but some of us remain outside of this blessing.' No, it simply says that all human beings, all children born to human parents, are held in the mind of God who cares for us and honours us and crowns us with glory. And this is true no matter who we are and no matter how we are embodied. We don't need to be a particular physical shape. We don't need to understand. We don't need to do anything. But God is mindful of all of us. He cares for all of us. He has crowned each of us with glory and honour. And that must mean that disabilities are equally a revelation of God's glory as are abilities. It must mean that the child with profound intellectual disabilities is equally able to bring God into our midst as is the eloquent preacher or spirit filled worship leader. It must mean that every disabled person, alongside every person who regards themselves as not disabled, has a contribution to make to the revelation of God's glory in his church.

The problem is that the church has lost sight of this truth. It has lost sight of this truth and been distracted by the secular view that disability is deficit, something missing, a negative experience. The unique opportunity that we have in the church though is to model a new understanding. To show the world something that is truly counter-cultural and prophetic. Prophetic of the kingdom banquet that is to come where all people, disabled and non-disabled, gather around the table in the presence of the God who crowns us with glory and honour and through our abilities and disabilities is fully revealed amongst us.

In these sessions we will explore something of what this might mean for us as individuals and for the church.

Read the psalm again and see if it comes to life in a new way for you

Time of silence.

A moment to share any thoughts and reflections.

Pray



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**Session 2: Disability in the Old Testament**

Leader's script

Welcome and reflections on the last session.

In this session we will reflect on 3 Old Testament passages that lead us to an understanding of disability as an aspect of our human identity and our relationship with God.

Made in God's image

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. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Genesis 1:26-28

Crucial to understanding what the Bible says about disability is discovering what is meant by 'the image of God' in which we are told humankind is made. Adam and Eve appear in Genesis chapter 1 as fully formed, fit and able human beings. They are able to work, to reproduce, to speak, think, move, see and hear. They are presented as archetypical human beings 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 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 limited by 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.

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 myths 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 image, even when life is at its smallest and most fragile.

The important thing we need 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. The image of the 'otherness' of God. An image that cannot be diminished or expanded no matter what our physical or mental shape, size, understanding, conformity or deformity, ability or disability might be.

Questions:

1. When you think about God, what images does your mind create? How do you embody God in your imagination? Do you think the way you imagine God diminishes or restricts your ability to appreciate the 'otherness' of God?
2. What do you think is meant by the 'image of God' in this passage from Genesis? How do you think God has made humankind in his image?
3. Do you think that disabled people might be able to reveal something of God's 'otherness' in the way they 'live and move and have their being'?

## God looks at the heart

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. Jesse 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 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.

Questions:

1. We live in a society in which outward appearance is greatly valued and in which some people pay a fortune to look what is judged to be 'good' or 'right.' How do you think this focus on ideal bodies makes disabled people feel? If you are disabled, how does it make you feel?
2. Do you think disabled people are given enough recognition and value in the church? If you are disabled, can you share your experience?
3. Have you experienced leadership or ministry from a disabled minister? If so, how did you feel? If you have never known a disabled minister, do you think you would find this challenging or easy to accept?

## A disabled Messiah

The Jewish people knew that God had promised them a Messiah. A rescuer who would lead them again to freedom and a new beginning. But how will this happen? Isaiah had some challenging words for God's people that, if they had listened and understood, would have prepared them for the up-side-down kingdom that Jesus was to bring into being.

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
(Isaiah 53:1-3)

The Messiah, the Saviour, was not going to be a popular leader. He was not going to be a person who was acclaimed and celebrated. He was not going to be a popular or attractive person.

No, the Messiah was to be a person who experienced marginalisation. A person who would be rejected. A person who would be disfigured and disabled. And yet it was to be this very experience that would make him the Messiah, the promised Saviour. The Messiah was to establish a new relationship between God and his people. But key 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. Many centuries before this though 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 the Old Testament metaphors of Temple and sacrifice come to an end and holiness flows directly from the pierced heart of God to all of his people.,

### Time to reflect

Take some time to think about this. Suffering and disability is central to the action of salvation that God entrusts to Jesus. The disabling wounds of crucifixion that Jesus as the suffering servant will endure become part of God. Disability becomes part of God. Maybe even, God becomes disabled in the nail torn and whip scourged flesh of Jesus. As many disabled people live lives of marginalisation, pain and discomfort, God lives again and again the pain of crucifixion in their wounds and impairments. But, as Isaiah foresees in his suffering servant prophecy, it is the wounded and disabled God who then cries out to all people: 'Come. Come to me all who are weary and burdened and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.'

Read the words of Isaiah 53 slowly and ponder how our disabled God brings wholeness in the midst of our brokenness, healing in the midst of our infirmity, joy in the midst of our sadness and life in the midst of our journey towards death.

Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,  
and we esteemed him not.  
Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
And who can speak of his descendants?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.  
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.  
Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper  
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.  
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,  
because he poured out his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.  
For he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

In this suffering servant, this suffering Messiah, disabled lives become holy lives. They become lives in which the image of God comes sharply into focus. Disabled lives are redeemed from the place of marginalisation, where they are devalued and passed by, and are brought into the very centre of God's new kingdom. What can the church do to be the place where this truth is revealed?

Spend a few minutes sharing your thoughts.

Pray



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**Session 3: Disability and the Kingdom of God**

Leader's script

Welcome and reflections on last week

This week we will look at the Gospels and the book of Revelation to see how disability fits into the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim.

Jesus and healing

A woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." Mark 5:25-34

Healing is a significant part of the Gospel, but why did Jesus heal and what does this mean?

Jesus' healings are proof of what lies at the heart of the Gospel. This is what says 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, those that were rejected are welcomed.

Was physical healing necessary 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 as 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.

Blind theologian 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 et al, Disability – An Inclusive Church resource, p87-88)

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 as if Jesus wanted disability to go away. It does seem as if 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 John Hull asks: 'Could I be blind and have 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?? 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 of 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.

## Questions

1. Have you ever experienced prayer for healing in church or somewhere else? If so, how did it make you feel? If you are disabled, how would you feel about someone offering to pray for you?
2. What do you think about the idea of the difference between healing and cure? Have you ever felt a sense of healing in the middle of the experience of sickness or disability? If you are disabled, are you able to find a sense of peace and wholeness in your disability?
3. How do you feel when you read the miracle stories from the Gospels? Some think that the lack of miracles today is a sign of our lack of faith. Do you think this could be true? If you are disabled, do the miracles cause you to question where God is in your experience?

## The disabled Christ- the wounds of resurrection

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

John 20:19-29

As we follow the Gospel narratives through the accounts of miracles, Jesus' teaching and parables, to his persecution and arrest and crucifixion and death, we come to see the suffering servant of Isaiah in all of his stark and distorted ugliness, laid in a tomb with a stone rolled across the entrance. He is, as Isaiah says, 'cut off from the land of the living. A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.'

However, as we celebrate each Easter and indeed every time we celebrate Communion, it is not long before the crucified Jesus, dead and buried, is being seen again. The empty tomb, his words to Mary and the other women and his appearances to his disciples convey the drama and awe and wonder that they all experienced.

Nancy Eiesland, who was a severely disabled theologian, in her book 'the Disabled God,' draws our attention to the accounts that highlight Jesus showing his wounded hands and feet and side to his disciples. It is maybe easy to miss the significance of what is happening. Yes, in one way Jesus' wounds, inflicted on his human body and now still visible on his resurrected body, are a mark of his identity. This is the same Jesus, there is no doubt. But, as Nancy Eiesland points out, there is far more significance to Jesus bearing his scars in his resurrection than just them being a means of identification. She writes:

'What is the significance of the resurrected Christ's display of impaired hands and feet and side? Are they the disfiguring vestiges of sin? Are they to be subsumed under the image of Christ, death conqueror? Or should the disability of Christ be understood as the truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection? The latter interpretation fosters a reconception of wholeness. It suggests a human-God who not only knows injustice and experiences the contingency of human life, but also reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival.'

(Nancy Eiesland, The Disabled God, p101)

In his crucifixion Jesus enters into a place of complete disability. Pinned to a cross and unable to move. Blood draining so robbing him of sight and hearing. Struggling to breathe and wracked with pain. Marginalised and isolated, ridiculed and abused, a broken and disfigured body. And the end of this experience is total disability, death. The inability to see, hear, move, think, function in any way. But the contradiction that is then presented in the risen Jesus is of the utmost significance. Jesus is alive, but the reason for his death has not been removed. The signs of his suffering are not wiped away or hidden, they are there still for all to see. His resurrection glory includes his disability, not transformed into some cosmetic symbol of suffering, but continuing suffering that has been and continues to be redeemed. Suffering redeemed from a negative experience of brokenness and pain and subsumed into a positive experience of holiness and renewal. Eiesland comments:

'Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Saviour, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true

personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.”

(Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p100 )

The wounded and disabled Jesus takes the full reality of our lives into the heart of God and invites us, in all of our own disability and woundedness, to join him in the fullness of his kingdom now and the fullness of his kingdom to come.

Questions:

1. Have you ever thought about the significance of the risen Jesus still bearing the wounds of crucifixion? How significant do you think this is? Would it be different if Jesus' resurrection body had been perfect and flawless with all marks and wounds removed?
2. How do you feel about calling God 'disabled?' Does it change your understanding of what or who God is? Does it make you feel uncomfortable when what is often viewed as a negative human experience is attributed to God? If you are disabled, how does it make you feel to realise that God shares your experience of disability?
3. Do you think that this should change the position of disabled people in the church? What do you think this might mean? If you are disabled, do you think your body could bear witness to the wounds of the risen Jesus in a special way?

## A new creation

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. They who overcome will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my child.

Revelation 21:1-7

From the perspective of disability, 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 and everything has been made new (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? Will 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

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 Mc Cloughry, 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.

I do not believe that the rich experience of this life will be lost in our new life and this includes our experiences of disability. But 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.

## Time to reflect

Spend some time in silence and ask God to highlight some of the new and challenging things you have heard in this session.

The final image is of the new creation. An experience in which there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. An experience in which everything is made new. And yet an experience in which the full variety and diversity of our human experience is still present. Present, yet redeemed to be essential to the fullness and glory of the new creation.

Our tears are wiped away, but the full contingency of who we are is not, and that includes our disabilities. Our disabilities though are joined to the wounds of Jesus and, just like his wounds are glorified, so we will share in that glory. The blind, the Deaf, the lame, the disfigured, the cognitively and intellectually disabled, the full range of neuro diversity, all aspects of mental illness and more. The human wounds and scars that we all bear, in some way become part of the new creation and we will be set free to be children of God in all of our variety and diversity.

How can disability in the church today be a prophetic sign of this truth?

How does the church fail disabled people and stifle their prophetic contribution to our mission and witness?

Can you imagine a church in which disabled people are fully liberated and set free to participate and belong equally with all others?

Hold these questions in silence for a few moments and then share any thoughts that have come to mind.

Prayer



Strength made perfect  
Disability and the church

**Session 4: Disability and the early church**

Leader's script

Welcome and time to reflect on the previous session

In this session we will explore what the Bible tells us about disability and the early church. Does this tell us that the church should be an experience in which disabled people can fully belong and participate and find freedom from marginalisation and restriction? Or should the church be striving for a perfection that does not include disability?

The Day of Pentecost

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Acts 2:1-4, 14-18, 21

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 had 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 comes 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, 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 been disabled, 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.

## Questions

1. We always talk about the Day of Pentecost forming a new, radical and diverse community of believers from all over the Roman world. Have you ever considered that this diversity extended to disability as well?
2. This multi-sensory Pentecost experience was accessible to all people regardless of their disabilities. Everyone was swept up in the experience. Do you think this

challenges our idea of church today where intellectual and physical ability is required to fully engage and take part?

3. Disability is no barrier to the Holy Spirit. The prophetic voice and gifts of the Spirit are given equally to disabled and able. Do you think the church is equipped to listen to the prophetic witness of disabled people, or has the intellectual and cerebral experience that we have turned the church into silenced these voices?

## We are the body of Christ

‘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

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul draws his well-known picture of the church as a body. 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 and disability, strong and glorious. In this way, as Paul teaches and models for us, the church’s 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 value all that they bring. A church that 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.

## Questions

1. The bodies of disabled people are often uncomfortable, sometimes dysfunctional and chaotic, for some, painful and ugly. What do you think disabled bodies and minds could bring to the Body of Christ in the church that could enrich our ministry and witness to the world?
2. We often strive for perfection in our worship, the music, the setting, the words and presentation. The involvement of disabled people may disrupt that perfection and bring something challenging and uncomfortable into our worship. Do you think this could be a good thing?
3. What do you think people with profound intellectual disabilities could bring to the church? People who struggle to understand (or do not understand at all) the basics of faith and yet demonstrate a love for God and the church community.

A thorn in the flesh - My power is made perfect in weakness

'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."

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The question has often been asked: 'Was St Paul disabled?' There are several references in his letters to his speech being hard to understand, his appearance not being very impressive, his sight not being that good. In fact, it seems that his appearance and speech are often criticised. Speaking about himself he writes:

'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

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 Paul speaks about his 'thorn in the flesh.' Something that he says has been given to him to 'keep him from becoming conceited' about the great revelations he has received. Whether this 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 3 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, possibly since birth. They are weaknesses that he makes it clear he had come to terms with and sees 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 he writes:

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."

2 Corinthians 12:10

This is one of those moments of revelation that change everything. 'My power is made perfect in weakness.' God says, it is your weaknesses and disabilities that are a demonstration of my power. In fact: my ability is made perfect in your disability. This is the

moment when the path to holiness is suddenly revealed. It is only when we own our weaknesses and acknowledge our disabilities. When we bring weakness and brokenness and disability into the centre of what the church is. It is only then that God's power, God's ability, God's perfection, God's holiness can be manifest within us and amongst us. It is only then that we truly become the Body of Christ. That wounded, disabled, broken, disfigured, holy body whose wounds are the glorious confirmation of this extraordinary truth: 'My power is made perfect in weakness. My ability is made perfect in disability.'

## Time to reflect

In a world where strength, wealth, power, achievement, status, authority and ability are celebrated and applauded, we as the Body of Christ in the church are called to look at things very differently. We are called to see that it is in weakness, poverty, impotence, loss, insignificance, service and disability that true power is manifest. The power that is made perfect in weakness.

What would a church that really understood this and acted on it be like?

What would have to change if we want to know the power that is made perfect in weakness?

Spend a few moments reflecting on this, then read Philippians 2:5-11

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

Spend a few moments sharing your thoughts.

Pray



Strength made perfect  
Disability and the church

**Session 5: Disability and today's church**

Leader's script

Welcome and time to reflect on the last session.

This week we will be thinking about the church today and why it is that disabled people find themselves disadvantaged and marginalised.

Finding grace

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

2 Cor 1:12

One of our most familiar prayers is taken from words that St Paul often used in his letters. It is a form of blessing that we call 'the grace.'

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God,  
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
Be with us all, evermore. Amen

But I wonder what you understand by the word 'grace'? What does it really mean to pray that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ will be with us. You, the person next to you, the fit and strong athlete, the frail elderly person, the blind person, deaf person, the wheelchair

user, the person with intellectual disabilities? What does it mean to pray that the grace of Christ will be with them, now, and for ever more? We know that 'grace' should be at the heart of what the church is, but what does that mean? In fact, do we really have any idea what 'grace' is?

Well, maybe one way of finding out what it is, is by finding out what it is not.

Disability theologian Thomas Reynolds, in his book 'Vulnerable Communion,' suggests that we should begin by looking at the secular world around us. The world, he suggests, is built on what he calls 'the economy of exchange.' In the economy of exchange, everything is given a value and everyone is seeking recognition and value. People seek what is called 'social capital,' which means that we look for status and recognition for who we are and what we can contribute to society. We want to be recognised and appreciated and accepted, and we want to be able to influence and contribute to society. We want to feel we are valued by others. Society naturally values some gifts and abilities above others and so values the people who possess these gifts and abilities above others and rewards them for what they are or do. So business leaders, sports personalities, film stars, pop musicians, and many others become 'celebrities.' People who are raised up, celebrated, acclaimed, looked up to. A hierarchy is created and these people occupy the very top.

Not everyone is a celebrity though, most people are just 'normal.' And in the same way that society raises some people up to celebrity status, so society defines what 'normal' is. We define the qualities and abilities that a person needs to be able to function and be productive as a member of our society. We create what is known as the idea or the area of 'normalcy.'

Many people fit in to this area of normalcy in some way. Physically and mentally, educationally and occupationally, socially and relationally. People obtain and achieve and are embodied in a way that means they are classed as 'normal' by society. But many people do not meet the criteria that society creates to define the area of normalcy and so fall outside of this. The colour of a person's skin, their cultural heritage, their accent, or the nature of their embodiment or cognitive function can all push a person out of the area of normalcy and into the outer margins of society. For disabled people, their disabilities, mental illness, cognitive function and more, mean that they are very often pushed to the edges, marginalised and devalued as misfits, labelled as people who are not normal.

Three things can happen:

They can be pitied, seen as 'poor people' in need of care. They are infantilised, treated as if they were children who are incapable of looking after themselves or making decisions for themselves.

Or they can be looked upon as 'heroes' if they manage to achieve beyond the diminished expectations of the area of normalcy. The Para-Olympics are a great example of this. 'The

amazing disabled people can run and jump and swim and so on. Isn't it amazing! Aren't they wonderful! Such an inspiration!

Or they can just fall through the gaps and disappear from society. They become invisible, ignored, unnoticed, 'non-people' who gain neither pity or respect but live hollow lives on the margins where they are often labelled as a problem that society would be better off without.

Pitied, viewed as heroes, or erased, three tracks that disabled people often find themselves being propelled along with no real control of their ultimate destiny.

This all sounds a bit harsh and dramatic and maybe condemning of secular society. If you have not experienced disability and don't know any disabled people well, you might find it hard to accept that this is going on today. But the experience of disabled people is a testimony to the cruelty of the economy of exchange and the negative impact it has on their lives.

In contrast though, Thomas Reynolds says, the church is called to operate in an 'economy of grace.' This is the complete opposite of the economy of exchange. Whereas, in the economy of exchange everything is valued and placed in a hierarchy and the area of normalcy dictates who is in or out, accepted or rejected, normal or abnormal, in the economy of grace nothing is valued because all things are of infinite value. In the economy of grace no one is labelled or valued because of what they can do or what they look like or what they achieve, but everyone is valued in relation to God. Everyone is valued in relation to the God who 'loved the world so much that he sent his only Son that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

Nothing we can do as human beings can add to the love that God has for us. No skill or ability, glamour or physical prowess, achievement or good works. No, God's love is a gift of grace. It is a free gift. But it is the gift that makes each of us, regardless of our ability or disability, of infinite value and worth both in relation to God and in relation to each other.

So, although many people fall out of the area of normalcy that the economy of exchange creates, no one is outside of the economy of grace. No one is excluded as Jesus repeats his call: 'Come. Come to me.'

The economy of grace is the economy in which the church should be operating. And by doing this the church should be providing a radical, counter-cultural, in fact revolutionary witness to the world. The church should be startlingly different to the way the economy of exchange operates. The economy of grace should stop people in their tracks and cause them to 'double take.' Because the economy of grace is the kingdom economy that Mary spoke about in the Magnificat, that Jesus brought into being, and in which Jesus challenged us to live, through his parables and teaching and witness.

Thomas Reynolds puts it like this:

‘The redeemed life .... marks a conversion (metanoia) to God that trades on the experience of vulnerability and inability as a harbinger of divine abundance. This does not mean a mere submissiveness and lack of power in relation to God’s utter power. To the contrary, it entails an acknowledgment of creaturely limitation and interdependence that cultivates an active openness toward human differences. A space is made for others, strangers, disabled persons—those without autonomy, power, and completeness measured in terms of the cult of normalcy. It is no accident that the biblical narratives portray a kind of salvation that, far from vindicating the conventional and normal, actually subverts it by pointing to the palpable presence of the divine in human vulnerability as a site of relational interdependence. The power of God is unseemly and strange. It discloses itself paradoxically, not in autonomy but through the stranger’s lack of ability. The stranger, however, is not merely a moral lesson. He or she is a person full of dignity, full of humanity, whose call is for us to be present, to listen, and to open up and share our lives.’

(Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, P20)

The question we need to ask ourselves as members of the church is, is that what we do? Are we operating the economy of grace? Are we that radical witness of Jesus kingdom life? Or, has the church slipped into the economy of exchange and bought into the hierarchies and the cult of normalcy that society has created. In our desperate need to be a popular church, to be a church that is accepted by society, have we in fact sold out to secular values and patterns of behaviour and lost the radical perspective that Jesus brought into the world? The radical perspective of the economy of grace. Maybe the experience and position of disabled people in the church is the litmus test of which economy we are operating in.

Can the church today own these words of St Paul:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

### Questions

1. Do you recognise the economy of exchange in the society in which you live? If you can, what can you identify that tells you this? If you are disabled, can you share your experience of living with your disability within this secular economy of exchange?
2. Do you think your church is operating in the economy of exchange or the economy of grace? What signs do you see or experiences have you had that influence your opinion?
3. What about you personally? Can you identify ways in which you make judgements and ascribe greater or lesser value to people because of their personal qualities and attributes?

## Commodity or community?

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:20-23

At the heart of Jesus' vision for his church is community. A community of believers who are united with one another and with Jesus in an economy of grace. A community where all are valued and welcomed and belong. A community where unusual embodiment or challenged understanding are no barrier to being part of the community and a fellow disciple of Jesus in every way. And this unity, this community, is to be the witness that the world needs of Jesus love and grace:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Something has happened to the church though. We see evidence of decline in many places. Church attendance has been falling year on year for decades. Congregations are older and getting more frail. It is difficult to keep the ministry of the church as we know it going. This situation has prompted many to try to plan for growth. Diocese have growth strategies and set targets. We look for ways of being a more attractive church. We try to be a church that can gain more traction within the secular economy of exchange. A church that people will see as valuable within the economy of exchange and so want to attend.

The trouble is that the economy of exchange is an economy in which people want some sort of pay back. People want to get what they are looking for from it. Things are only valued if they are delivering something that the economy of exchange values. And that means that 'the show' becomes important. It is 'what church gives to me' that makes it valuable. It is the 'buzz' that I get that is the criteria on which I make my judgement.

Churches that are valued within the economy of exchange attract people. They are looked at as successful. They become influential and people want to replicate what is judged as success. Smaller churches who are struggling to keep the basics going become failing churches. Maybe they no longer have a vicar. Maybe they close. Maybe they are taken over by a 'successful' church and become a clone. Slowly what is small and appears to be weak becomes devalued and marginalised and is regarded as irrelevant. The economy of exchange becomes the predominant economy in which the church is operating and this seeps through every aspect of the life of the church.

And a symptom of this that we see in many churches is the marginalisation and diminishing of disabled people. The disregarding of the people who do not generate the social capital needed to be popular within the economy of exchange. Disabled people are largely absent from our churches because they find that the experience of church is no different to the experience of secular society. Once again, the economy of exchange excludes them, diminishes them, objectifies them and makes them 'other.'

We have already suggested that the way the church treats disabled people might be a litmus test of which economy we are operating in. I would suggest that reassessing the place of disabled people in the church and becoming a truly inclusive community where all people can belong on equal terms as valued, contributing disciples of Jesus Christ, is the way to redeem the church and rescue us from what is currently an inevitable and unstoppable spiral into the economy of exchange, where the church will become a commodity just like all other commodities in the secular world.

Reimagining how St Paul's revelation: 'My power is made perfect in weakness,' or 'my ability is made perfect in your disability,' can come alive within the church today is the jolt that is needed to restart the churches heart of grace and pull us back toward the economy of grace that Jesus calls us to plant ourselves firmly within in John 17.

Time is running out though. The clock is ticking. If the church is going to be saved and God's power is going to be made perfect in us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, now is the time to rediscover that when we are weak, we are strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10) And now is the time to discover that it is our disabilities, our disfigured bodies, impaired senses and dysfunctional minds that are the very things that God needs to bring about the revival that we are all longing for. Now is the time, before it is too late.

## Questions

1. How does all this make you feel? Do you think a radical reimagining of what the church is in the light of 'my ability is made perfect in your disability' could be transformative?
2. What do you think is at the centre of your church? A striving for power or an acceptance of weakness?
3. What do you think your church could do to bring disability and disabled people into the centre and model the radical economy of grace in your parish?

[A voice from the margins](#)

[Time to reflect](#)

Two thousand years ago a young pregnant teenage girl uttered the words that sparked the coming of the Kingdom of God. This was Mary, pregnant after the annunciation, living on the edge, disgraced, frightened. In danger of being rejected by her husband to be and ostracised by her family. As a woman, she was already on the edge of society. As a pregnant unmarried teenager, she is slipping out of the area of normalcy and acceptability.

And yet it is from here that she proclaims the kingdom that is coming. The kingdom she knew would be fulfilled through the child she is carrying.

Hear these words spoken from the margins. Spoken by the excluded and marginalised, and let Mary's vision of the kingdom come alive in you today.

My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will  
call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me —  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants for ever,  
even as he said to our fathers."

This first whisper that the kingdom long-promised is here, is uttered by a weak and vulnerable girl from a place of marginalisation and isolation. What kingdom truths are in the mouths of the marginalised and disregarded of the world today? And are we ready to hear what they have to say?

Spend some time in silence reflecting on this.

Share your thoughts.

Pray



## Strength made perfect Disability and the church

### **Session 6: An inclusive church**

#### Leader's script

Welcome and time to reflect on the last session.

In this final session we will be imagining a model of church and community that might enable us to be the truly united and inclusive church that we are called to be.

#### The Limits Model

In the first session, we spent some time looking at what are called models of disability. The medical model, social model and minority model. Each tries to define a disabled person's relationship with their own impaired body and with society. You may remember that there was one significant problem that we highlighted with all of these models. They all rely on a definition of difference to have any substance. In order for the models to stand up, they need a category of 'disability to be defined, and to do this it is necessary to define 'nondisabled' or 'normal' in order to work out what characteristics and traits make people disabled. This immediately makes disabled people different. It makes them 'outsiders' and puts them in a place of deficit. It puts disability in a negative category and encourages the stereotyping and judgements that are so damaging and diminishing for disabled people.

The economy of grace that we explored in the last session though is an economy in which all are equal. Equality that is founded in God's equal love for all people. In the economy of grace there is no difference. There are no insiders and outsiders, no able and disabled, no normal and abnormal. There is just us in all of our loved and glorious diversity. What we need to find is a framework that helps us understand how we might create a community like this. We need a model that demolishes the dualistic definition of able-disabled and unites all of us in an experience of diversity and fellowship. The model I want to explore that can help us do this is called the 'limits model.'

The limits model is proposed by Deborah Creamer in her book 'Disability and Christian Theology – embodied limits and constructive possibilities.' In this she sets out a proposal to develop what she calls a 'limits' understanding of disability within a Christian theological framework that counters the 'deficit' model of disability. Seeing disability not as a negative experience or absence of a skill or ability that others might possess, but rather as a positive part of the experience of limited diversity that is at the heart of human existence. Her proposal is that we should regard limits as an unsurprising element of our human experience, something that we all share as human beings, whether regarded as able bodied or disabled, and therefore as a common experience from which to build understanding of difference and diversity. This is not regarding limits as deficit, but rather looking at the variety of limitations that we all have as gift within the landscape of identity, which through the lens of Paul's vision of the church as 'the body' in 1 Corinthians 12, then fit together to compliment and enrich each other, creating a new vision and experience of wholeness. Creamer writes:

'The limits model challenges the deficit model, suggesting that disability is not something that exists solely as a negative experience of limitation but rather that it is an intrinsic, unsurprising, and valuable element of human limit-ness..... A limits perspective, rather than leading us toward fragmentation or universality, can instead offer a common ground for conversation and become a productive datum for theological reflection.'

(Deborah Creamer, Disability and Christian theology, P96)

The limits model demolishes the dualism by seeing all people as sharing a common experience of limits. Limits are intrinsic to being human, but, far from being points of deficit, our limits are what shape us to be unique people. Unique people each made in the image of God who together in fellowship can bring that image to life. In this, the limits model demolishes the dualism, not by expanding the paradigm of normalcy to contain those currently categorised as disabled, but instead by expanding the concept of disability into the paradigm of what I will call 'limitness.' A paradigm that embraces all those who are judged to be disabled and all those who regard themselves as able in a single and common experience of limited human diversity.

Theologically, the limits model allows us to see the full variety of the human experience and all forms of embodiment as part of the variety that lies at the very heart of creation. Creation that the creator has declared to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). The process of creation is consistently presenting a vast variety of possibilities through the repeated cycles of reproduction and development that are intrinsic to the ongoing movement of the created order. Within the vast variety of life that has arisen from this, sits the full breadth and variety of embodiment that we experience as human beings. Whether what is judged by society to be disability is as a result of genetic anomalies, illness or accident, it all springs from the possibilities that God has sown into creation. The range of possibilities that is uniquely mixed in each of us and determines that no two human beings will ever be the same, physically or psychologically. In the limits model there is no such thing as deficit but only diversity. Diversity in which and through which we can glimpse something of the rich diversity of God, and diversity which is both blessed and declared to be sacred as God pronounces creation to be 'very good.'

That is not to say that disabilities are part of God's plan for us or the world. No, God does not control the evolutionary processes that are at work in creation like a cosmic conductor or factory manager. Instead, God has created a universe of infinite possibilities and ordained that every outcome of those possibilities has the potential to be sacred. In God's pronouncement that creation is 'very good,' he was enduing every future possibility and outcome of creation with sacred potential. Giving everything that has flowed from those first moments of creation the potential to become part of his divine and glorious purpose, even the experience of disability. The church's mission is to realise that sacred potential for all people. To bring all people into an experience of community that releases that sacred potential and brings the economy of grace to life.

### Questions

1. In what ways are you limited and what do you think about your limitations? We often think it is our gifts that bring sacred potential into our lives and to the church. What do you think of the idea that your limits could also offer sacred potential?
2. Has there ever been a time when a limitation you experience has sparked an encounter or relationship that has been unexpectedly fruitful? If you are disabled, can you remember a time when your disability has been the catalyst for an encounter when God has been revealed?
3. What difference do you think it would make in your church and/or in society if people were willing to own and share their limits and limitations and allow them to be places of social and sacred encounter?

### The limitness paradigm

I want to lead us on from the limits model to what I call the paradigm of 'limitness.' The limits model stresses that limits are an unsurprising element of our human existence. The human state is a limited state. We are limited by our embodiment, by the laws of nature that govern our planet, by the partial nature of our understanding of the world, and by our own individual anomalies and quirks. Our lives are contained within what I will call an experience of 'limitness.'

'Limits' describe the restrictions that are or become evident as we explore the nature of our human embodiment and interactions. Limits are the concrete restrictions that we can identify both in each of us as individual human beings and in all of us as members of the human race. Limitness on the other hand describes the place or experience from which these limits are shaped and through which they continue to exist. As human beings, our limitness is expressed in an infinite variety of ways. Some, as in the case of disability, more obvious than others. The key to human flourishing is to learn to flourish in our place of limitness. To flourish with our limits. The concept of 'limitness' gives space for what Deborah Creamer calls 'the fluidity' of limits. Transforming 'limits' from being rigid and restricting and allowing them to be ever changing and stretching and morphing into new possibilities.

Our limitness I suggest is in a way the shape of our lives. A shape that changes and expands and contracts through the course of our lives and is unique and personal to each of us. We are born into limitness as helpless dependant beings with no capacity to think rationally or meet our own human needs. We develop skills and explore limits, both the limits of our embodiment (what causes pain and what gives us pleasure) and the limits of the material world we live in (cause and effect, action and reaction, the laws of nature and the effects of time) throughout our childhood and into adult life. We discover limits as adults and learn how to live within them and how to expand them through our relationships with others. And we experience increased limits as we enter older age, maybe, in the case of dementia, returning to the limits we were born with as the capacity to think rationally and meet our needs is lost, before experiencing the final limits of our human existence at the moment of death. Our lives are shaped by limits that come together to create a unique and personal place and experience of 'limitness,' but, as Deborah Creamer suggests, this need not be seen in the light of deficit, but rather within the landscape of gift and creativity. This, I believe, is realised in relationship, when individual limitnesses interact and inform each other, forming new shapes in relationship that can expand the limits and possibilities of individuals and communities.

When limits are viewed as part of the natural human experience, we are able to take the step of viewing them not as deficit but as gift. For each of us it is the unique landscape of our limits, the totality of our limitness, that creates the ground from which we each have a unique personality and perspective on life. It is then the interaction between our perspectives that becomes the place of creativity in which new perspectives and understandings are forged and allowed to live. What the limitness model demands is that we all explore and come to know our limits. That is not to say that we must necessarily develop a passive acceptance of our limits. No, it is important to recognise that disabled people have the right to live in an incongruous and hostile relationship with their impaired bodies and the consequent limits they experience. But whether our limits are something we can come to accept and be at peace with, or whether they will always be a place of anger and struggle, it is important we learn to inhabit our limits in order that they can be released to become a place of creative sacred potential.

Disability demands that people live at and own their limits and gives no opportunity to retreat and hide. Visible disabilities clearly do this, but hidden disabilities do as well. They are ever-present, often elements in a person's life that touch every aspect of the way a person lives and understands themselves. A disabled person cannot retreat from their disability. They cannot ignore it. They cannot pretend it doesn't exist and in this, disability challenges all those who regard themselves as able to explore their own limits and see what gift might be lurking where once they thought there was only deficit.

Your limitness is the shape of your life, and if you are going to realise the full sacred potential that God has blessed you with, you need to learn to fully inhabit your limitness. That means that each of us need to learn how to live at our limits rather than living our lives only in our comfortable centre. Disability means that people have to live at their limits for much of their lives. Their disability, their limit, is an ever present experience that they

cannot escape from. The thing is though that our limits are the place of divine sacred encounter, not just for disabled people but for all of us. It is when we walk at our limits, when we inhabit and expose our limits to each other that we find the sparks of God begin to fly. It is our limits, or the interfaces and interactions between each of our limitness shapes, that creates the ground and potential for divine sacred encounter.

Fully owning your limitness is making yourself vulnerable. It is exposing your weaknesses. It is throwing off the masks you wear and the protective layers you hold so tightly to. And it is in that vulnerability that God seems to show up. Our God in the risen Christ holding out his wounded hands and exposing his wounded side. Our God in all of his disabled vulnerability saying: 'Come to me.'

In the limitness paradigm, disability offers a prophetic witness and challenge to all people. Visible disabilities expose a person's limitness. They lay us bare and expose our vulnerability and dependence. Which means that disability models the way of holiness. The way of vulnerability. The way of sacred encounter. The way of the cross. .

The paradigm of limitness draws everyone onto this way. It says: 'Disability is not deficit.' 'Vulnerability is not weakness.' 'Limits are not failure.' Because God's strength is made perfect in your weakness and his ability is made perfect in your disability.'

## Questions

Can you relate to your life being an experience of 'limitness'? Do you think your limitations could be a catalyst for God to be revealed in you and others?

Has there ever been a time when you have been vulnerable but found that this was an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in your life and the world? If you are disabled, has your disability brought about encounters in which you have felt the presence of God?

What do you think a church built on the paradigm of limitness might be like?

If these sessions have inspired you to want to explore how your church can reflect on aspects of accessibility and inclusion, you can look at the '360 Accessibility Audit' that can be downloaded from the Diocese of London Disability Ministry webpage. You will also find theological resources with suggested books and online articles and links to organisations that work in many different areas of disability.

## Conclusion

These six sessions have only been an introduction to thinking about disability and the church. They are not an end in themselves but only have any worth if they have sparked in

you an impulse to discover more. They have only been of any worth if they have left you knowing that it is time for the church to both reflect and change the way in which disabled people belong to and participate in the life and worship of the church.

For too long disabled people have been marginalised and viewed as needy by the church. Their prophetic call and witness to the radical, counter-cultural kingdom that is founded in the economy of grace has been ignored. For too long the church has run after power and status and influence rather than recognising that weakness is the route to real power. The power of God that is made perfect in our weakness. For too long the church has been buying into the secular economy of exchange and mirroring the cult of normalcy that rejects so many people.

The paradigm of limitness creates a framework to counter all of this. It demolishes the dualism that is at the heart of the economy of exchange and the cult of normalcy. It has the potential to be the foundation of a truly counter-cultural church that brings the Kingdom of God alive afresh for this generation.

Spend a few moments in silence

Some words of blessing

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:5-7

Share the standout thoughts and ideas you will take away from these sessions.

What will you do with them?

Pray