



Strength made perfect
Disability and the church

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 archetypal 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 archetypal 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