



Strength made perfect
Disability and the church

Session 2: Disability in the Old Testament

Participants handout

Begin by sharing your reflections on the last session

In this session we will reflect on three 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

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide.

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

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

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's notes.

'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)

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.

Listen to the recording of this section or read the text in the leader's guide

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)

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 in silence and then share your thoughts.

Pray