



Strength made perfect
Disability and the church

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