



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