



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 21st 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