
Editorial

Differently Abled

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I would hazard a guess that, as a conventionally able-bodied person, my experience of anything to do with ‘disability’ is fairly typical. An interest in equality and inclusion, and the long-standing Christian concern for wellbeing, health, and healing – as well as an awareness that the ageing demographic of the churches brings many of these considerations into sharp focus – persuaded us on the *Crucible* Editorial Board to devote an issue to the subject of disability. It has proved a rich and complex subject, of which we can touch on only a few aspects. But talking to people, gathering information and articles, and reading only the tip of the iceberg of disability theology, has proved immensely enriching, and persuaded me that the expression ‘differently abled’ is not a euphemism, but a genuine description of a way of experiencing the world – and one from which we can all benefit. We all know someone with a classic example of disability – sight or hearing loss, mobility problems, mild cognitive impairment, learning difficulties. We probably also know people with physical or intellectual constraints which are less immediately apparent, such as asthma, dyslexia, ME, or autism. Many of the people we know in these situations are perfectly capable of holding down a job, with or without some degree of assistance or adaptation of the environment (a hearing aid, a guide dog, a wheelchair); and some of them are quite likely to be enviably high achievers. David Blunkett, Tanni Grey-Thompson, Peter White, and Francesca Martinez are household names in the worlds of politics, sport, journalism and comedy – and I suspect my selection here says more about my generation and my Radio 4 habit, than about the breadth of contribution to our public life by people with disabilities!

Anyone who has been involved in running events or organisations, or considered the re-development of buildings, applied for grants or sought planning permission, is unlikely to remain unaware of basic issues of access and inclusion: lifts, ramps, hearing loops, automatic

doors, accessible toilets. More sophisticated considerations may extend to good colour contrast in information signs, or distinctive décor to signal different areas indoors. We have probably ceased to notice the relatively new-found convenience of light-switches and plug-sockets at lower or higher points on the wall than they used to be; and we may have completely forgotten that dimples on the pavement near junctions, or bleeping pelican crossings, are there to signal to the partially-sighted that this might be a good place to cross the road.

For someone who is used to finding the world set up for the convenience of the average physical condition, suffering a temporary blip in normal capacity shows up how massively inconvenient an apparently minor impairment can be. A wrist in plaster demonstrates how much we rely on both arms for basic balance, and need two hands for simple tasks like washing and dressing. Bunged-up ears us give a taste of how socially isolating it is to be left out of the banter in a noisy gathering; and simply having to negotiate the world with a pram – never mind a wheelchair – brings it home to us how high are the gaps between platforms and trains, and how dangerous it is when scaffolding blocks the path, or cars park with their nearside wheels hitched up on the pavement. As well as annoyance and frustration, the temporary sufferer may feel pity for those who are deprived of their company, assistance, or conversation; and regret that the world has been cheated of their valuable insights and contributions. It may dawn on the typically-abled how much better things might be if alternative points of view were included in the design of anything, from kitchen appliances to concert halls, or even political manifestos. As St Paul, who suffered himself from his famous ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2 Corinthians 12:7) puts it: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26 – NIV)

Christianity’s USP, the Incarnation, provides the clearest demonstration possible of the importance of the physical body to God. Jesus went through conception, gestation, birth, growth, puberty, adulthood and even death, from the perspective of completely inhabiting a human body. Even though the Devil quoted him Psalm 91 (in Matthew 4:6) about angels protecting him against so much as stubbing his toe, it’s reasonable to assume that during his earthly lifetime Jesus experienced a few injuries and minor ailments – from childhood scrapes and bruises to the occasional mishap in the carpenter’s shop – which caused some temporary inconvenience. He may even – although his earthly life ended very young by modern

standards – have felt some minor age-related changes and twinges, and become aware that he might not be able to take perfect health and mobility for granted. Disability theology makes the point that even the risen body of Christ retains evidence of the injuries inflicted by torture and crucifixion. The description of God's Messiah, in Isaiah 53, presents 'a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,' adding 'he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases,' and reflects common prejudices and taboos against disabled people by calling him 'despised and rejected ... stricken, struck down by God.' At least one commentator has even queried why the Jesus of the Resurrection appearances is not pictured walking with a stick, given the damage still evident in his feet and torso!¹ In any event, it is clear that at the heart of God there is experience of physical impairment; and of the disadvantage and discrimination this can bring.

The Bible (as much as common parlance) can carelessly associate deafness or blindness with stupidity or stubbornness, and disability is generally regarded as a state of helplessness. Rules and regulations in the Hebrew laws exclude people who are disfigured or disabled from public worship (eg Leviticus 21:17-19), and disabilities – including life-limiting mental health conditions – may be viewed as the result of demonic interference, or as divine punishment for sin. Healing miracles and Messianic signs – 'the deaf shall hear, the blind see, the lame walk' (Luke 7:22) – superficially at least reinforce the 'medical model' that disability is something to be cured, overcome, or eradicated.

Interestingly, closer inspection shows Jesus' own attitude to be more subtle and enlightened. Rather than assuming that the solution is to give him sight, Jesus asks the blind man at the roadside (Mark 10:51) what help he wants. (In his autobiographical *In the Beginning There Was Darkness*, the late Professor John Hull speculates that in modern times the answer might be "Some computer training and a job in a firm with a decent equal opportunities policy"¹²) Jesus encourages the paraplegic by the healing pool to take some responsibility for himself, not just passively continue to await help (John 5:1-9). When bystanders suppose that disability is a sign of shame and the result of sin, Jesus patiently explains that it is not like that (John 9). He shows sensitivity to the needs of a deaf person by taking him aside from the crowd to communicate graphically (Mark 7:32-33), but breaks taboos about the visible presence of impairments in the religious community, and about touching the afflicted, by telling the man in the synagogue

with the withered arm to “Stretch out your hand” (Matthew 12:13) and inviting Thomas to run his hands over his own crucifixion injuries (John 20:27).

The outcome of Jesus’ healing miracles comes closer to an understanding of the ‘social model’ of disability – where access and inclusion problems are the result of the unaccommodating way in which society and the physical environment are organised. Those whom Jesus heals are immediately accorded their full place in society, restored to relationships and communities, and given a role in God’s scheme of things. The woman bent double would have been unable to stand up and give praise in the traditional upright posture of public worship: it is no coincidence that she is healed on the sabbath and then called a ‘daughter of Abraham’ (Luke 13:16). The woman with debilitating permanent bleeding is not castigated for being out in the street and touching a religious man, but is recognised and praised for her courageous faith – and again recognised as a ‘daughter’ (Luke 8:48). The man with wobbly feet and ankles, whom Peter and John heal in Jesus’ name on the way to the Temple, immediately starts ‘walking and leaping and praising God’ (Acts 3:8). The formerly deranged character who lived as an outcast amongst the tombs, once calm and respectably dressed, is commissioned to ‘declare how much God has done for you,’ and accordingly proclaims his salvation throughout the city (Luke 8:39). Jesus orders that Jairus’s daughter restored to life should immediately be given food: to be nourished and sustained so that she can achieve her full potential (Luke 8:55).

Furthermore, reading the Bible from a disability perspective – as in John Hull’s *In the Beginning Was Darkness* – yields some intriguing insights into a God who is beyond normal human senses. Sometimes, the Biblical text (accidentally?) highlights the contrast between fallible, sense-bound human prejudice, and God’s view. At the anointing of David, Samuel is warned not to be swayed by the good looks and tall stature of Jesse’s elder sons, ‘because God looks on the heart’ (1 Samuel 16:8); but the narrator still can’t resist remarking on young David’s handsome appearance (v12). Dramatic irony might suggest that this is an ominous hint of how his charm and good looks would later lead him into trouble!

Some descriptions of God’s nature actually reflect the experience of blindness: ‘darkness and light are both alike to you’ (Psalm 139:12); whilst in contrast to the usual metaphor of sin and death, the darkness surrounding God is associated with goodness: ‘Clouds

and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne' (Psalm 97:2). 'This not only suggests that human sight cannot penetrate the darkness,' writes John Hull, 'but also that ... God is used to it. It makes no difference to God.'³ The experience of what we term 'disability' can illustrate for all of us aspects of God which we may otherwise find baffling. At a Service of Nine Lessons and Carols accompanied by sign language interpretation, the complexities of 'St John unfolding the great mysteries of the incarnation' suddenly became clear to me as never before, when the interpreter rendered John 1:3 in gestures which simply demonstrated: 'Without God: nothing.'

But however positively we may regard 'disability,' we naturally want to alleviate suffering; and so we struggle to define how much physical or intellectual difference is a God-given quality or variation, and how much is problematic. Does pre-natal screening, which might avoid the birth of children with certain characteristics (even if they cause no pain to the person concerned and can't be passed on, like Down's Syndrome), devalue and disregard the contribution of disabled people to the extent that they will be eliminated from society – horrifically similar to eugenics programmes? How much should we attempt to 'correct' deafness, blindness or varieties of body shape, when those who experience such differences may feel they have a perfectly valid culture, identity and means of expression? It can be controversial to offer surgery to make congenitally deaf children hear, when their deaf parents navigate the world effectively in sign language. Some people with short or missing limbs greatly prefer work-arounds which don't depend on prosthetic body parts. 'Nothing about us without us' has long been a slogan of disability activists; and there are as many reactions to disability as there are people who experience it. Nearly half of all people with disabilities are over pension age; so whilst disability activists fight tooth and nail for choice and autonomy, and younger people comb through the options and details of care packages, an older person coming to terms with a limiting condition after a lifetime of exercising choice and control may be grateful to have the hassle replaced by a menu of pro-active help.

As an alternative to patronising pity, the achievements of paralympic competitors in the Olympics, Commonwealth, and Invictus Games have raised some people with disabilities to sporting superhero status. That brings its own drawbacks: not everyone looks good in comparison with heroically gifted and determined elite athletes, and

there has not been a noticeable improvement in the circumstances of the ordinary disabled citizen. Statistics on the Disability Living Foundation website show that nearly a third of disabled adults have no formal qualifications (compared with just over one in 10 of everyone else); and less than half of those of working age are in paid work. It has also been shocking to learn that simply having a disability can still be a barrier to Christian vocation, as highlighted by an article in *The Tablet* in May 2018. Attending mass celebrated by a priest in a wheelchair, at St Beuno's Spirituality Centre in North Wales in 2017, I had no idea that according to the 1983 Code of Canon Law in the Roman Catholic Church he would have had to obtain special permission from his Bishop to lead the service from a seated position, 'and then must do so only in private.'⁴ Concerns that 'it would be very difficult for a person who cannot speak to preach', or 'if you've no hands you just can't celebrate the Eucharist'⁵ seem to show an alarming lack of imagination and experience. Are we fitting people for society, or society for people? Is there a parallel here with Mark 2:27 'The sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath'?

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The contributors who have filled this edition with their reflections on life, work, families, theology and care-giving – by, with and from a disability perspective – illustrate the variety, joys and frustrations of life in a variety of circumstances. A striking feature is how they simply 'get on with it', adapting to situations which seem to many of us to be massively challenging – but which to them are simply part of life.

Revd Dr John Gillibrand blends theology and practicality in discussing what it would mean to have a church, and a society, which welcomes people with disabilities 'as if they are expected.' As the parent of a severely disabled adult son, and having wide experience of the disability rights movement, of public institutions and public policy, he has some particularly pointed things to say about the impact of funding cuts to welfare services in the name of austerity, and what that implies for social and theological attitudes to disability.

Revd Joe Griffin reflects on living with a family history of the potentially inheritable blindness caused by *Retinosis Pigmentosa* – from the lifelong knowledge that he was likely to go blind, to calming the panic of opticians examining his daughter (who does not have the condition). Whilst he describes some of the adaptations he has

made in pursuance of his long and varied ministry, he also (a trifle hair-raisingly) reveals that as a young man, night-blindness was less of an obstacle to riding a motor bike than it was to dancing at the local disco. Philippa Gregory, who became disabled after an accident, shows remarkable stoicism in reflecting that losing mobility as an adult with a career and family must be less harrowing than losing it earlier in life; but she candidly reveals that disability does not turn a brisk, busy, and competent person into a compliant saint – however grateful she is for the occasional ‘kindness of strangers’.

Revd Martin Reynolds describes the experience of what has sometimes been a dual prejudice against a cleric in a same-sex partnership, who is also a parent and carer to fostered and adopted children with challenging behaviour, and now also cares for an elderly mother with dementia. If Martin and his partner described themselves as ‘a typical 70s gay couple surrounding ourselves with lovely objects’, their experience otherwise overturns stereotypes. Practical, psychological, structural and theological issues have often collided to produce frustration and disappointment, alongside profound insights into the nature of God; whilst the undoubted miracle of severely disturbed youngsters coming to faith does not mean that they forget how to be angry or violent.

Putting this edition together has been a fascinating experience. Whilst there are common threads and learning points, and experts may differ as to the best way to talk about, accommodate and understand disability, the over-arching story is at heart about all of us. We are all God’s children: gloriously and differently made, bearing the image of God, and bringing to the common human party all manner of different gifts. As BBC journalist Peter White once remarked: “I don’t wake up every morning thinking ‘Oh dear, I’m still blind.’ I just think I’m me.”

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Notes

1. Francis David: 'Excluded from the feast', *The Tablet*, 26 May 2018, p11.
2. John M Hull: *In the Beginning There Was Darkness* (SCM Press 2001) p44.
3. John M Hull: *In the Beginning There Was Darkness* (SCM Press 2001) p134.
4. 1983 (Roman Catholic) Code of Canon Law, quoted in Francis David: 'Excluded from the feast', *The Tablet*, 26 May 2018, p11.
5. Comments quoted in Francis David: 'Excluded from the feast', *The Tablet*, 26 May 2018, p11.