

There are times when we read the bible, every now and then, when we have to take a step back and think 'wow that can't be right'. And with these times, we as a church sometimes have to acknowledge our failings and possibly do a little unpicking.

Within our Gospel this morning we hear one of the many episodes of Jesus' healing ministry. We hear of a woman who had suffered terribly with her back for eighteen years, so much so that she couldn't stand straight. And Jesus, cured her and she was set free of her ailment. This passage on one hand teaches us much about Jesus, his power, his divine nature and his love for those around him.

However I think this passages also speaks a lot of how disability was perceived at the time, and can offer us a stern reminder not to echo this, or follow a particular understanding of disability as perhaps we have done in the past.

Many emphasise can be placed on our gospel reading this morning and a common one is talking about the all loving nature of Christ, through choosing to provide salvation when asked for it. A 'knock and the door shall be opened' gospel if you like, ask and you shall be fed. It is a wonderful message, the message of God who is always there, ready for anyone to be united with God.

As Jesus said when challenged, do you not on the Sabbath un tie your ox or donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day? It is a message so profound, to be brought to God is not an act which falls under Sabbath law, but something as natural as providing cattle with drink. Jesus as a good strong Jew, isn't casting aside the Sabbath, he isn't a postmodern theologian trying to get up people's noses. Jesus came to fulfil the law not to break it.

He kept the Sabbath, as for Jesus to bring the woman to God and away from the Devil was as natural as a person feeding their cattle or as a parent to feeding their children. It isn't a task for Jesus in that moment, it was part of his nature, his divine nature to provide a cure, freeing this woman from her ailment, from the evil spirit that caused her to be crippled. In doing so he fulfils the Sabbath. This morning's Gospel brings us the message, that there is nothing more natural than being united with God and we need but ask.

However, as how many household arguments start, "I'm not annoyed with what you said, it's how you said it!"

As I'm sure you have guessed I am uncomfortable with the way in which many of the healing passages within the New Testament portrays disability and sickness. Our western culture's attitude towards disability is of course changing and in more and more ways for the better. However in the past it has been heavily influenced by texts like our Gospel this morning. Right the way back to the core of our bible we find texts that outline the difference between the pure and the defiled.¹ And usually this difference was created in order to work out how people can interact with the temple, and if you were seen as defiled, your interaction was limited to say the least.

¹ Lev 21:16-23

We have had, and to some extent still have a very dualistic view towards disability. Even the way in which we label disability, to be able and to be disabled. Within the time of the writer of Luke's gospel, to be disabled was to be outcast, to be disabled was in their eyes to be more than likely linked to sin, to be disabled was to be possessed by the devil or evil spirits. As we saw in our Gospel this morning the woman was believed to have a spirit which caused her to be crippled. At the time to be disabled was to be absent of God and filled with a presence of evil. Here I think we catch a glimpse of the fear of the Gospel Writer's unknown. In their time knowing so little about disability meant that demonising was there cultures way of dealing with it.

And now in this age, we can look back on it and know how wrong, and how damaging their position towards disability was. The demonization was so imbedded as an understanding to the writers of the gospel that the disabled were used as a linguistic devise, a powerful image of good and bad. The comparison of God having the ability to heal and ultimate of salvation. Through the acts of healing, Jesus brings those who are disabled from the outskirts of society into being accepted. The disabled were so outcast and that they are used within the Gospel as an image of the fallen world.

Throughout scripture and throughout our liturgy are little phrases that use physical attributes such as blindness or deafness as illustrations of the fallen world. Often these illustrations are used to give a contrast between the fallen world and the day when we shall be reunited with God. Isaiah being the most well-known. When speaking of the coming day of Yhwh "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (35: 5-6)

I say again as I started there are times when we read the bible when we have to take a step back and think 'that can't be right'. And as a church sometimes we have to acknowledge our failings and do a little unpicking.

When I was ordained I was ordained, with the new chaplain to the deaf community in Salisbury Diocese Neil Robinson.

Wow what a man! Neil is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. Neil is Deaf from birth and working both within the deaf community and the hearing community where he is a curate. In an interview Neil uses a quote which I think speaks so much in response to our Isaiah passage of the ears of the deaf being unstopped.

He quotes, "Deaf people are not incomplete hearing people; they are complete deaf people" "Deaf people are not incomplete hearing people; they are complete deaf people" There is nothing lacking in Neil what so ever.

Although it is worth acknowledging that as a passage the Isaiah passage has provided a message of hope throughout the centuries, it has also reinforced an image of disability. It is the notion from an 'able bodied position' in inverted commas, suggesting both, that people with "disabilities" are less than whole, and that bodily "disabilities" must be cured before such persons can be fully included in the kingdom of God.

When it comes to passages like the Isaiah passage of opening the eyes that are blind and the Gospel passage this morning depicting evils spirits as the cause of ailments, I urge you to feel uncomfortable, and to remember how disability has been viewed in the past. If we step away from an understanding of the able and disabled, what we can gain from our Gospel is beautiful. What our gospel can preach to us this morning is that what prevents us from reaching God, is not permanent and shall pass. But of course looking at our scripture from a 21 century position, being disabled does not distance ourselves from God as our Gospel might suggest. What distances ourselves from God is individual to all of us.

The ministry of healing isn't necessarily about illness. We seek for wholeness and healing. And of course it is most certainly not about curing, or "fixing" anyone. The process of healing is the process of taking down the barriers which make us feel cut off from God. And of course we all know our own personal barriers, and they are so often the barriers that others around us cannot see. Healing is about reconciling ourselves, renewing ourselves so that we can appreciate the fullness of ourselves, and of God's love.

For our female character this morning in the Gospel passage, the fact that she could stand straight after her encounter with Jesus isn't the central message, the central message is that after her encounter with Jesus she felt fully acknowledged, by her community, by those around her and in that moment she knew the presence of God. She had her personal barrier broken down in order that she may see the glory of God. She like any of us here today, felt shut off from the world around her, and after her encounter she was set free.

Within our time, we remember that we are all complete, individual, different people. To quote Neil my fellow deacon again, "Deaf people are not incomplete hearing people: they are complete deaf people" To put it simply, we don't need fixing to be loved by God. There is no ideal as to what a perfect human should be, and if we were trying to find the ideal human, it would be you.

This morning's Gospel brings us the message, that there is nothing more natural than being united with God and we need but ask. But it is for us to ask, for us to determine within our own spiritual lives where we are with God, what our barriers are, whoever we are we are loved by God, and he never expects us to be "fixed" but to be as he created us and to be at peace with that.