TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY: 
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

The question ‘what does it mean to be a human being?’ is complicated. At one level the answer seems quite straightforward. To be human is to be created and made in the image of God. As the writer of Genesis so beautifully puts it: “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1: 27) To be made in the image of God is to reflect something of the glory of the God who is love. (1 John 4: 8) To be human is to be loved and above all else, to be known and remembered.

Psalm 139 gives us some inclination as to the depths of such an observation: “For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well. My frame wasn’t hidden from you, when I was made in secret, woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my body. In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there were none of them.” God loves, shapes and forms human beings even before they are born. To be human is to be created, known and loved. So far so good!

If this is all true, then it must be true for all people must it not? If all human beings are made in God’s image, then what might it mean, for example, to state that a person with Down’s syndrome was made in the image of God exactly as they are? What kind of image of God does such a powerful suggestion present to us? What might it mean to suggest that people with disabilities are fully in God’s image just as they are?

Think of it this way. All of us are open to the temptation to create God in our own image. I am strong, so God must be stronger! I am rational and reasonable, so God must be like me only much more rational and reasonable. I am reasonably good looking, so God must look a little like me only much more beautiful. And so when we are reflecting on God what we often end up with is a slightly bigger and more transcendent picture of ourselves. When this happens, those who are perceived as different from ‘ourselves’, be they people with disabilities or other ‘different people,’ can only look as if they are in some way or another not quite in God’s image. But of course, what we really mean is that they are not quite in our image.

But if we think of disability as an aspect of God’s image; an aspect of what it means to be human, then we will be torn from our self-obsessions and drawn into that strange upside down world of the Gospel where the weak become strong; the strong are perceived of as weak and the brokenness of a human body becomes the locus of our salvation. That which the world perceived as a failure and as worthy of casting out ends up to be precisely the place where God lives and moves and has God’s being. Is it coincidental that our salvation was wrought in and through the broken body of Jesus?
Disability in all of its various forms is not what we think it is. Or, perhaps, it is exactly what we think it is. Perhaps that is the problem. What we perceive to be the case is very often not the case at all. I have a friend who is completely deaf. She told me not so long ago what her vision of heaven was. For her, heaven is a place where she will meet Jesus, and she just knows that his signing will be perfect! Her vision of being human is not that she is rid of her deafness, but rather that others are rid of the communicational barriers that prevent them from being with her in meaningful ways.

However, we might say, “heaven is a place where our bodies will be made perfect!” But what exactly is perfection and who says what it is? The resurrected Jesus said to Thomas: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” (John 20: 27) The resurrected Jesus still carried his wounds. If perfection and the life of heaven is marked by what culture teaches us is ‘perfection’, then why does Jesus still carry his wounds? If heavenly perfection turns out to be surprisingly different from the way we think it will be, then more than probably our ideas of ‘earthly perfection’ and ‘normality’ will turn out to be false or at least questionable.

So how might we sum up a theology of disability? Being human is a powerful act of mystery. There is no such thing as normal human being. Clearly all human beings are abnormal insofar as “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23). As such we are all distanced from God and in that sense deeply disabled. We should take great care when we name others disabled and act towards them as if such a label really explains anything at all.

Disability is just one more way of being human before God. There is nothing within disability that separates us from one another. It is not our bodies, our intellects or our capacities that make us acceptable to God; none of these things makes us human. It is God’s unending love for each human person that creates and sustains us in our humanness. Disability is simply a variation on a common theme.

Within such an understanding that community we call the Body of Christ – the Church – is called to become a place where discrimination and prejudice are abandoned and uncompromising love is embraced. Only then can the apostle Paul’s vision of a community within which there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female... black nor white, able bodied nor disabled,” become a reality. (Galatians 3: 28) Disability is that place where we notice such things and, in noticing, learn to practise differently.

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