

## Sunday 8 March 226 – Disability – Michael Bayley

*In this, the third of the Lenten series of sermons in the series 'Exploing Social Justice', Michael Bayley considers the issue of disability.*

### **Readings:**

Leviticus 21: 16-23. Luke, 14: 12-24.

### **Sermon: Disability – Michael Bayley**

The reading from Leviticus is strange. “No one who has a blemish shall draw near to offer the food of his God. One who is blind or lame, who one who has a mutilated face or limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease all scabs or crushed testicles.” This assumes that what is offered to God must be perfect and nothing which is less than perfect is good enough. In many ways this is an admirable sentiment: we should not offer anything shoddy to God but to transfer this sentiment from the gift to the giver is a mistake. God accepts us all as we are, however imperfect in whatever way. That does not mean that there is not plenty of room for improvement but the position from which we start is God's acceptance of us as we are now. There is something significant here about the rather confused way we often look upon our bodies and I'm sure you will see parallels with the way women have been viewed throughout the ages

There is no one clear view in the Hebrew bible. Consider Isaiah 58 where the prophet is talking about what sort of fast is acceptable to God. “This is the fast I require: to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to set free those who are oppressed, tearing off every yoke.” And he refers to the hungry, the homeless, the naked and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk. ( Isaiah 58: 9) But disabled people do not get a mention. The only explicit reference I could find to disabled people was in Ezekiel: The Lord says, “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the cripple.” [34: 16] Is this apparent disregard of disabled people a reflection of the preoccupation with the need for perfection which is reflected in the way that any animal offered for sacrifice in the Jewish temple had to be perfect and without out blemish, or just that in the animal kingdom of which we are part the imperfect, the runts tend to be rejected.

In addition illness or disability is often seen as the result of you or your parents having sinned in some way. One striking example is how King David was punished for stealing Bathsheba as his wife from Uriah the Hittite by causing their child to die. God is seen as being responsible for that but it applies to healing too, for example, “I am the Lord your healer.” [Exodus 15: 26 ) or “I cried to you for help and you healed me” [Psalm 30: 2]

Is the situation different in the New Testament? There are very few references which make it absolutely clear that disabled people are accepted just as they are but in today's gospel from Luke Jesus says: “When you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” And there is a greater significance in this because the story makes it clear that these people are blessed people who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God. They are not being excluded or shut out.

We have many examples of the compassion of Jesus - for example, in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep of the goats, which is about people who are hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and in prison. It is also obvious in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But disabled people do not get a specific mention. It is not that Jesus ignores disabled people, indeed he goes out of

his way to meet them, but when he does meet them he generally cures them and they are not disabled any longer, suggesting that dis-ease, disability, is an evil to be vanquished as a demonstration of the emergence of God's kingdom. It is worth noting that Jesus often says after healing someone, for example the woman who had a haemorrhage: "Take heart; your faith has made you well." (Matthew 9:22)

I think it is futile to look for specific verses to show Jesus took what we would consider exactly the appropriate attitude to disabled but it is obvious from the gospels that Jesus accepted everyone exactly, as they were especially those who were disadvantaged. For me two things stand out in Jesus' approach to illness and disability. First there is one very important word *splangxizomai*. This means overflowing with powerful compassion. It is something which is comes from our guts: it is a visceral reaction coming from a powerful deep down love and also has within it a sense of anger. For example "A leper came to Jesus beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you wish you can make me clean." Moved by pity (*splangxizomai*) Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him: "I will; 'be clean', and immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. "(Mark 2: 41) What is also striking here is the way Jesus accepted and affirmed the leper unambiguously by touching him.

The second aspect of Jesus' approach is very simple: "Whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them; this is the law the prophets" [Matthew 7: 12)

What pulls all this together from what we see in the Old Testament and from Jesus in the New Testament is that justice is central . In the Lent course booklet Ian Wallis quotes Dominic Crossan: "Justice and love are a dialectic - like two sides of a coin that can be distinguished but not separated... Justice is the body of love, love the soul of justice. Justice is the flesh of love, love is spirit of justice. When they are separated, we have a moral corpse. Justice without love is brutality. love without justice is banality".<sup>1</sup>

The importance of seeing this as a justice issue becomes clearer when we make the distinction between impairment, which is the actual physical or mental condition itself, and disability which is how that impairment affects life of the person in society. If I am short sighted that can be a considerable disability. If I'm able to wear glasses that disability almost disappears. Look at the man in the wheelchair:<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire. Jesus against Rome, Then and Now* (Harper, 2008), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> Image courtesy of Jon Tyson, Unsplash.

His impairment is no doubt eased considerably and becomes less of a disability by having a wheelchair. However, the steps reinforce his impairment and make him more disabled. Disability could be described as the way in which society makes impairment a problem. On the other hand society can also reduce the extent to which an impairment becomes a disability by, for example, providing a ramp or a lift for the wheelchair.

But that is often expensive. You could say that in many ways disabled people are an expensive nuisance. Just consider how expensive it can be to create disabled access or how much it costs to provide the education which a child with severe impairments needs.

I used to lecture on disability and I was very struck by the way in which the major advances in provision were made not by people being nice but by disabled people themselves and their parents forming pressure groups and making a determined, well informed and passionate fuss, refusing to take no for an answer. It is *splangxizomai* in action. It is fundamentally a justice issue. It is about all people who are disabled and people who are discriminated against in all sorts of ways demanding justice. Think for example of the power of the civil rights movement in the States and the ways in which advances have been made in the position of women. In a less spectacular way brilliant work has been done by organisations like Mencap for people with learning difficulties, MIND, Scope, RNID, RNIB, Ben's Centre in Sheffield. There is an oft repeated mantra for all these groups: "Nothing for us without us." What disabled people need is acceptance, respect and power. That fits in well with what Jesus said to those he had healed, "Your faith has saved you."

The most important thing that most of us can do is to support people who are disabled in their fight for justice so that their impairment is not allowed to become a disability and the man in the wheelchair is not thwarted by those steps.

PS After the service Janet Morley pointed out to me that the story of Philip baptising the Ethiopian eunuch seems to show that the early church was unworried by Leviticus' strictures. (Acts 8: 26-39)

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