

'In Dependent Bodies: Exploring a Christian Understanding of Disability'

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Having been invited to reflect at the Spirituality Special Interest Group on a Christian understanding of disability, it was a happy coincidence that the day of the meeting fell on the anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar and the tragic demise of the much-admired naval hero Lord Nelson. A happy coincidence because it allowed reflection on the recent addition to Trafalgar Square's 'Fourth Plinth' of Marc Quinn's sculpture, 'Alison Lapper Pregnant', described by Nigel Reynolds, the Daily Telegraph Arts Correspondent as 'an 11 foot 6 inches tall sculpture in Carrara marble of a naked, heavily pregnant and badly disabled artist'.¹ Reynolds states that although 'London's newest and strangest landmark proved extremely popular with the public, one so-called expert called it horrible and said it looked like a slimy bar of soap, while another said it was kitsch', prompting Reynolds to call his article, 'Whatever would Nelson think?'²

Indeed, what would Nelson think? The contrasting opinions stirred up by Marc Quinn's sculpture seem to typify polar reactions to those living with disabilities; yet, those who reacted negatively in being confronted with a visible reminder of disability appear to have forgotten that the statue of Nelson in his grandeur shows a man blind in his right eye and without his right arm, having lost both to battle-wounds. Perhaps that is the source of the contrasting reactions: the nobility and ignobility of disabilities either caused or created?

Thankfully, there were also positive reactions to 'Alison Lapper Pregnant',. Yet some of the negative reactions could stem from the view that to be *disabled* can imply literally that: a person can be seen as *dis-abled* - *less able* than others. The word '*disability*' can imply a move away from ability, with all the negativity that the prefix '*dis-*' can imply, for example, *diseased*, *disfigured* and *disordered*. Given such polar opinions, I was interested in how the scripture and traditional teaching of the Church viewed people with disabilities, having been provoked by a quotation from one of the Catholic Church's daily readings:³

If you say, 'Show me your God', I reply, 'Show me the man that you are and I will show you my God.' You must show me that the eyes of your soul can see and that the ears of your heart can hear. Those who see with bodily eyes... distinguish things that differ, such as light from darkness, white from black, ugly from beautiful, the excessive from the defective, what is well-proportioned and shapely from what is irregular and distorted...For God is seen by those who are capable of seeing him, once they have the eyes of the soul opened. All men have eyes, but some have eyes which...do not

¹ Nigel Reynolds. "Whatever would Nelson think?" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/09/16/nlapp16.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/09/16/ixhome.html>. 23/09/05.

² Reynolds. "Whatever would Nelson think?"

³ St. Theophilus of Antioch Lent: Week 3, Wednesday – Second Reading, in *The Divine Office Volume II Lent and Eastertide* (Collins, London, 1974).

see the light of the sun. But the light of the sun does not fail to shine because the blind do not see; the blind must blame themselves and their eyes.

The quotation begins positively, with the view that all people are made in the image of God and that, consequently, we can see God in each other; however, it becomes intensely negative when it describes such contrasts as 'white from black, ugly from beautiful, the excessive from the defective...' and goes on to state that 'the blind must blame themselves' for being blind.⁴

This harsh view from such an early church writer made me reflect on the legacy of such critical concepts and to consider how the Christian church has grown in its understanding of people living with disabilities. A specifically Christian perspective was chosen rather than a broader religious base covering many faiths, so as to concentrate on understanding the teaching of my own faith background; yet, as a point of interest, the figurative use of disabilities, such as indicating how a person is 'deaf' or 'blind' to God because of their failure to understand is common to Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions.⁵ Within these traditions, focus is made on the 'deaf', the 'dumb', the 'blind', or on those who are 'crippled', 'lame', or 'lepers', through figurative or healing stories; yet, throughout history, such terms have been used by society to ostracise and condemn people. These terms can be used in such a discriminative way so as to act as a stigma, marking out, according to Erving Goffman, a sociological and psychological 'ideology to explain (the disabled person's) inferiority and account for the danger he/she represents (to the community).'⁶

Such an ideology seems reflected in the de-humanising treatment of mental illness throughout Europe from 1500 to 1800, the so-called 'Age of Reason',⁷ where people locked away in an asylum could provide entertainment for on-lookers. Yet such inhuman treatment was not isolated to state institutions; sadly, parts of the Christian church seem also to have been marked by an ideology that singled out those with disabilities as a threat to the community, seen not least in the actions of Martin Luther, who took offence with a twelve year old boy with learning disabilities in Dessau and is said to have advised the Prince of the region that:

*'If I were the Prince, I should take this child to the Moldau River which flows near Dessau and drown him.' The advice was refused. Luther then suggested: 'Well then, the Christians shall order the Lord's prayer to be said in church and pray that the dear Lord take the Devil away.' This was done daily and the 'changeling' died in the following year.*⁸

⁴ St. Theophilus of Antioch in *The Divine Office Volume II Lent and Eastertide*.

⁵ Sheikh Isse A. Musse. "Disability: An Islamic Insight". <http://www.icv.org.au/ps20011018.shtml>. 15.10.2005.

⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Simon & Shuster, New York, 1963), p.5.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Random House, New York, 1965), p.73.

⁸ Cited in Ted Harrison, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1995), p.57.

Given the harshness of Luther's stance and the way both society and scripture have used stigmatic labels for people with disabilities, I wanted to review a Christian understanding of disability and undertook a literature search on the themes of 'Christianity and disability' and a 'theology of disability', whilst undertaking a specific review of disability issues within the scripture and teaching documents used in the Roman Catholic Church. In order to provide limits to the textual research, the New Testament Gospels were reviewed, together with an exhaustive search for figurative or literal references to disabilities within the daily prayers and readings of the Church, commonly known as the 'Liturgy of the Hours'. In addition to this, specific Church documents on themes of social justice were reviewed to provide a modern Church understanding of disability issues.

When looking at the daily prayers, scriptural and historical readings of the Liturgy of the Hours, the following themes were found that have helped to shape the way disability issues have been viewed by the Church throughout history:

1. God is believed to take brutal vengeance upon his enemies, and to discipline his people through love by punishing them with affliction.
2. The punishment of sin has long-lasting consequences, affecting many generations; yet, this is balanced by the idea of personal, not trans-generational, accountability.
3. Sin bears physical consequences, evoking the anger of God to inflict sickness, disability and death.
4. Deafness, muteness, blindness, lightness and darkness are used literally and metaphorically to indicate sin or ignorance.
5. There is hope in salvation: the forgiveness of sins, healing, restoration, and the resurrection of a body made perfect in Christ.
6. Suffering is believed to be redemptive: it allies us to the suffering of Christ; it completes the suffering of Christ (Col 1:24) and acts as a witness to the world.
7. The uncleanness of sin/sickness distances a person from God; yet, Christ, the crucified, disfigured God restores this relationship.
8. Sickness marks an imperfection in the image of God, to the extent that a person can be seen as 'ugly', 'defective', 'distorted', weak, unfit for life, and 'a monster'.
9. Suffering is held to be fundamental to life and beyond our understanding.
10. Human life is created by God and has a unique dignity: humanity is made in the image of God – the unborn, the weak and the vulnerable are to be protected through charitable care.

11. Suffering born by trial and tribulation can be seen as a test of faith; there is recognition that some bear up more than others under this trial.
12. Self-mortification, even to the extent of the sacrifice of martyrdom, is believed to ally a person with the suffering of Christ and bring them closer to God; if such actions are undertaken, a person is called to careful discernment and spiritual direction.

These themes were established by categorizing the literature according to how it made reference to disability issues, for example, by the use of metaphor, or through an understanding of the causes of disability, with the following quotations being typical of the types of literature reviewed:

Taken from Psalm 38 (39)

Take away your scourge from me. I am crushed by the blows of your hand. You punish man's sins and correct him... O Lord, turn your ear to my cry. Do not be deaf to my tears.

This psalm tells of God's punishment for sin and uses deafness as a symbol of how God can turn away from the sinner.

Taken from Colossians 1:15-2:3

...Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his son's death on the cross, and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven... And now I am happy about my sufferings for you. For by means of my physical sufferings I complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, which is the church...

Colossians 1:24 (I complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings) provides the basis for a Christian theology of redemptive personal suffering.

Taken from a reading from Pope St. Gregory the Great's 'Moralia on Job', Book 3:15-16

'I form the light and create the darkness': for when the darkness of pain is created by blows received from outside ourselves, the light of the mind is kindled by instruction within... We have grown at variance with God through sin. Therefore it is fitting that we should be brought back to peace with him by the scourge...

This uses metaphors of light and dark to describe spiritual insight and shows how God punishes sin.

Taken from a reading from the life of St Frances of Rome

God tested the patience of Frances not only in the external events that happened to her, but it was also his will to try her in her body by many illnesses. It is a well-known fact that she was tried by long and serious illnesses. Yet she was never seen to show the slightest impatience, or the slightest dissatisfaction with any service done for her no matter how clumsily it was done...There were frequent epidemics in Rome, some of them thought to be moral and contagious. At those times the saint ignored the risk of contagion and did not hesitate to let her heart go out to the suffering and those in need of another's help. When she found them, and that was easy to do, she first led them by her compassion to confess their sins, then she busied herself taking care of them. She would lovingly encourage them to accept willingly whatever sickness they had from the hand of God, and to bear it for love of him who first bore so much for their sake.

St Frances of Rome (1384-1440) provides an example of Christian charity in the support of people who suffer. Her beliefs clearly demonstrated a theology of redemptive suffering.

Taken from a reading from the first notebook of St Vincent of Lerins (c.434 CE)

...if the human form is changed into some shape that is not of its own kind, or at least something is added or taken away from the full complement of its members, then the whole body must perish or become a monster or at least be weakened in some way.

This text likens a person who is maimed, disfigured or disabled in any way to a monster, so subject to weakness that it would be better if they were dead.

Such examples give a breadth of Old and New Testament theology, showing how disease, sickness and disability can be regarded as punishment for waywardness and how suffering can be gladly born by linking it to the redemptive suffering of Christ. Christian theology believes that Jesus came to heal the effects of our waywardness and restore humanity to the fullness of the image of God. In breaking the boundaries of the separation between humanity and God, Jesus broke the boundaries of his day by reaching out to those marginalized by society.

The Gospels relate accounts of the miraculous healing of the 'lame', the 'mute', the 'deaf', those 'crippled' or with 'leprosy', and though such terms have been used throughout history to discriminate, ostracise and condemn people, the healing narratives recount how Jesus spiritually and physically touched the lives of many that others sought to shun. Some Christian theologians have dismissed

the miracles as pure myth, whereas others attribute them to psychological phenomena brought about by the power of Jesus' personality. The underlying ethos of this review is that the Gospel miracles demonstrate the power of God over all things and bear witness to the works of the God through Jesus.

In literary form the healing stories do bear similarities to Hellenistic 'miracle-narratives', yet this does not have to imply that Jesus is simply another 'wonder-worker';⁹ it speaks more of how the profound nature of questions around sickness and healing affect many cultures. What is important from a theological perspective is how such miracles have affected the way people with disabilities are viewed when clear links are made between healing and the level of faith, between sin and sickness, and when disability is used as a metaphor for a lack of faith or understanding. Important from a disability perspective is the fact that the healing accounts show the extraordinary compassion of Jesus; how he moved beyond social boundaries in his contact with those considered unclean, and how he restored the dignity of those ostracized by society, a compassion that continues to reach out to those still considered by some to be the 'lepers' of today.

Yet, in reviewing modern documents of specific Catholic teaching on social justice issues from 1891 towards the end of the papacy of John Paul II, such compassion for those with disabilities seems somewhat in the background. Compassion is there, but you would have to know where to look, for in almost an entire century of the Church's social documents there is 'no specific mention of individuals with disabilities. Only by reading into the spaces, the lacunae, the erasures, may one read into these official pronouncements the Church's concern'.¹⁰ This must be taken in the context of the growth in understanding of disability issues within society as a whole; indeed, the rise of a distinct voice within the secular disability rights movement is reflected in a clearer presentation of the Church's own teaching on the rights and dignity of people who live with disabilities. This is especially true of documents released during and after the 1981 International Year of the Disabled, particularly through the Church's call for the need for a just wage and the right to work to be applied to the particular needs of people living with disabilities.¹¹

In recognizing this growing concern there is a voice for the support of people with disabilities that speaks out within the Church's social teaching; it is the strength of Christ's compassion and care for people on the margins of society that cries out from the Gospels and it is the restoration of the dignity of humanity through the redemptive suffering of Christ that calls to us from the daily prayers and readings of the Church. Yet, contextual and cultural difficulties have often led to misunderstanding this voice of support by focussing on a theology that sees God as punitive and judgemental. Such a theology is not a positive theology of disability.

⁹ Alan Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels* (SCM Press, Ltd., London, 1975), p.23.

¹⁰ Elizabeth J Browne, *The Disabled Disciple. Ministering in a Church Without Barriers*. (Liguori Publications, Liguori, MO, 1997), p.42.

¹¹ John Paul II. "Laborem Exercens". http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html 12.09.2002.

By far the most commonly cited problem within the literature reviewed for this study was the issue of the link between sin and sickness, what Eiesland calls 'sin-disability conflation'¹², where biblical themes of the link between sin and sickness have affected the views of church and society to this day. The second most cited theme was the issue of suffering as a virtue, described by one person as 'bearing my cross without question'. Suffering is seen as 'for my own good', and in fact will help me to be more Christ-like.'¹³ Another issue was the impact and legacy of segregational charity for institutionalised people with disabilities, perhaps de-humanizing them in accord with Goffman's stigma theory; but in addition, such charity can have the self-affirming effect of 'a buzz from doing good works and being seen to do so' on the part of those who care for people with disabilities.¹⁴ Such negative themes have to be balanced by Jesus' concern for people with disabilities in the Gospel narratives; yet, as one critic commented, one of the striking characteristics of the church is how it has sadly, 'in the past, given little attention to their needs.'¹⁵

Writing from her perspective as an ordained Episcopalian minister, Nancy Lane cites a Lutheran church report stating how, 'Among the clergy as well as the laity, there exists much prejudice, ignorance, indifference, rejection, and misunderstanding of disability.'¹⁶ Lane identifies a theology that victimizes persons with disabilities by blaming them for lacking the faith to be well; accusing them of being demon possessed; questioning who sinned in order for them to be born disabled; stating that suffering is God's will for their lives; and doubting their worthiness to be able to approach God because of their disability.¹⁷ Lane writes from a Protestant perspective, but criticism can also be laid against opinions formed from misunderstandings of Catholic theologies of suffering: comfort and hope can be found in the crucified and risen Christ; yet, some people with disabilities have found this turned around into an ill-thought cross-bearing approach that speaks little of a compassionate God.

The review of the 'Liturgy of the Hours' shows much Catholic sentiment in the school of 'offer up your suffering;' yet a misunderstanding of a Catholic theology of suffering can itself prove disabling to those who live with disabilities. Fundamental to a Catholic understanding of a theology of suffering is the document *Salvifici Doloris*, where suffering is seen as 'something which is *still wider* than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted

¹² Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994), p.72.

¹³ See 'Fran's Story' in Christopher Newell and Fran Gillespie, "Psychiatric Disability and Pastoral Care: Towards a Richer Theology of Disability", in *Contact The Interdisciplinary Journal of Pastoral Studies* 136 (2001):5-13.

¹⁴ Harrison, 57.

¹⁵ Colin Hulme, in the preface to the first edition of John Penton, *Widening the eye of the needle. Access to church buildings for people with disabilities* 2nd Edn. (Church House Publishing, London, 2002), p.ix.

¹⁶ Nancy Lane. "Changing Attitudes, Creating Awareness." http://soeweb.syr.edu/thechp/Changing_Attitudes.doc. 25.02.2002.

¹⁷ Nancy Lane. "Victim Theology." http://soeweb.syr.edu/thechp/VICTIM_THEOLOGY.doc. 25.02.2002.

in humanity itself' (italics in original).¹⁸ Disabilities, with which a person may have to live, do not have to equate to suffering - it is disabling attitudes, lack of access, and the experiences of sickness and pain that can cause suffering instead.

From a Christian perspective, suffering in itself is an experience of evil, which is only redeemed by Christ's suffering on the cross. Thus, in a world in which pain and suffering is a reality, such affliction is redemptive not in itself, but by being allied to the suffering of Christ. The joy, if you will, of the cross, is that God took on our frail human nature and transformed it through his death and resurrection into a hope of glory in our lives: restoring the communion of relationship broken by sin, and giving a foretaste of our eternal communion with God. God is not the vindictive inflictor of suffering for suffering's sake; the scripture and Church teaching reviewed for this study certainly show that suffering can be a time of trial, testing, and even discipline; but this should be seen in the context of how *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.¹⁹ Suffering is part of the mystery of life for *all* people, not just those who live with disability: sickness, disease and ageing are a fundamental part of our mortal human nature - we are in dependent bodies.

Recognition of this humanity gives recognition to the fact that people have different abilities and naturally have different vocations in life; yet, care must be taken that any mention of a specific vocation of disability²⁰ does not serve to disempower or isolate those who live with disabilities.²¹ The danger of misunderstanding a theology of suffering or a 'vocation' of suffering can lead to the glorification of personal suffering that sees people with disabilities 'as objects of pity and mission only',²² objectively failing to recognize the inherent dignity and rights that each person has as a child made in the image of God. Such a misunderstood theology is a disabling theology, not a theology of disability, as it focuses first not on the dignity of the person, but on their disability. It is a disabling theology because it segregates, disempowers and *disables* the person who can be seen as an object of charity.

It is in response to such disabling theologies that Nancy Eiesland proposes what she terms a 'liberatory theology of disability'.²³ Eiesland's use of this type of an understanding of a crucified, disfigured, disabled God can be seen to disempower both victimizing theology and misunderstood theologies of suffering by highlighting that, 'Our bodies participate in the imago Dei, not in spite

¹⁸ John Paul II. "Salvifici Doloris." http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris_en.html. 21.09.2002.

¹⁹ Romans 3:23.

²⁰ The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the Modern World (*Christifideles Laici* §53) recognizes the unique vocation of people with different abilities: John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (Catholic Truth Society, London, 1988), p.52.

²¹ *Christifideles Laici* §53 states positively that *all* members of the Church are 'sent forth as labourers in to the Lord's vineyard,' treating people living with disability with equality and respect. Nevertheless, the concept of a separate 'vocation of disability' can be equated with negative victimizing theologies, see Lane. "Victim Theology."

²² Anthony P. Kowalski, "The Church and the handicapped," in *America*, 27 May, 1978:426-27; cited in Lane. "Changing Attitudes, Creating Awareness."

²³ Eiesland, 100.

of our impairments and contingencies, but through them.’²⁴ Such a theology deflates the cruel link between sin, sickness and disability by the very fact that Christ took on our frail humanity; he was despised and rejected for us in order to restore the dignity of all, not least those who are despised and rejected because of their disability:

*In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Saviour, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.*²⁵

Eiesland’s theology of disability may not be accepted by all, but it is symbolic of a growth in understanding within the Church of the needs and gifts of people with disabilities. Sadly, the Church has left many people feeling despised and rejected by not always showing a level of solidarity or interdependence with people who live with disabilities; but in an honest response, many Bishop’s conferences and individual dioceses have issued guidelines and statements on aspects of inclusion.²⁶ Such statements have been produced after much consultation and after much reflection on past hurts; yet, through a renewed and unequivocal opposition to ‘negative attitudes toward disability’²⁷ the Church stands out as a rational and prophetic voice in society, urging true solidarity and the interdependence of all. Such a radical recognition our own vulnerability, regardless of our level of ability, helps to bring about an inclusive, interdependent Church and helps to build an inclusive, interdependent community.

²⁴ Eiesland, 101.

²⁵ Eiesland, 100.

²⁶ For example, Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Valuing Difference. People with Disabilities in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Department for Catholic Education and Formation, London, 1998).

²⁷ US Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities”.

<http://www.nccbuscc.org/doctrine/disabilities.htm>. 27.09.2002.