



Disability and God: a place to begin

By David McLachlan

This is one of a series of posts intended as a useful resource for pastors and churches. It is produced by the Disability Justice Hub of the Baptist Union. Our idea is that the whole church should be involved in a conversation about disability, inclusion, Christianity and church. For that reason, at the end there are some discussion questions. You are welcome to use these just to think and pray through what is said here, or to help with a small group discussion on the topic.

This post explores quite a fundamental question: whether God's attitude towards people with disabilities is as positive as it is towards everybody else. That is related to the persistent and troubling question of whether or not disability has something to do with sin. If we are honest, that question has led to a history of those whom we label as 'disabled' being regarded as less than perfect (whatever that means) and as in some way of less value.

There are lots of questions related to this one, such as how we go about reading and interpreting the parts of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, that involve disability, or what we think the resurrection body might be like. However, before tackling those it would be useful to see whether we can find a solid anchor for an underlying confidence that people with or without disabilities stand before God just the same – that the good news of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus is for everyone. Can we have confidence that when we say that we are not just overlooking an awkward sense that there is something 'wrong' about disability? That confidence can then shape how we explore those other questions.

To get straight to the point, as Christians our faith is in Jesus Christ. As Colossians 1:15 puts it, 'He is the image of the invisible God'. It is Jesus who reveals God and God's character to us most vividly. To be more focussed still, it is perhaps to the cross and resurrection of Jesus that we go to discover God's fundamental attitude towards humanity. There God addresses once for all the whole human condition and we find that God is for us (Hallelujah!). He is willing to pay the cost of saving us from death and offering us life and new creation. What we find out about God through the cross and resurrection should shape how we interpret all the rest. As Jürgen Moltmann has put it, the cross is 'the foundation and criticism of Christian theology.'¹

So, the question becomes: what do we think the cross has to say about disability? Again there are related things to explore later, like the disabled state of Jesus' body on the cross, or the presence of the wounds of crucifixion after he is raised. But the core point here is what God deals with through the cross of Jesus.

1 From the opening reflection on Luther's statement that *crux probat omnia* in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans RA Wilson and John Bowden (London SCM Press, 1974)

There is no doubt whatsoever that the cross deals with sin. We know that people continue to act in sinful ways, but we believe that the power of it, and the power of death, have been broken and we look for evidence of that in changed lives. In describing that, Whether we use language of sacrifice, justice or victory, Jesus takes our sin on himself and offers forgiveness.

But that does not seem to say enough. If the cross is only about sin, the moral failures of humanity all the way back to the Fall in Genesis 3, and is only expressed in terms of sin, then for the challenges and often suffering related to disability to be dealt with there, we can feel pushed into saying that disability is also somehow a matter of sin. We need to say more about what it means for disability and all sorts of variety, accident and risk to be part of what is to be human.² These can be sources of joy and of suffering. They can make us feel cut off, or alienated, from God and each other, but it seems too simplistic just to put them in the 'sin' box. Where do they fit into being human, into being God's creatures?

Going back to creation, we believe God created out of nothing. Creation is not just more of God and it is not perfect in the way God is perfect, although it is good and full of potential. For these things to be meaningful, it has been said that God in a sense must have limited himself to allow for that 'nothingness' into which he created.³ This is similar in a way to God being willing to limit himself to place his presence in the Tabernacle, or the Ark, or most dramatically in Mary's child. This picture creates a tension that we recognise in life. There is a constant pull back towards that nothingness, that perishing. There is a moral part of that picture, the risk of sin. Sin involves choice and we are accountable for it and need forgiveness. But there is a wider aspect to the picture. God's creation out of nothing in this way also allows space for variety, accident and in the present case disability. Things have turned out one way, but might have turned out another. A word often used for that is 'contingency'. Some aspects of this are very positive, as people with disabilities will testify. Some are not, and many of our experiences are wrapped up in a complex way with society's often poor response to people who are different.

The main point, though, is that if we take what we believe about creation seriously, we ought to disentangle disability and sin. Each has its own place in a creation that is full of risk, which is why it is so important that God is always accompanying and caring for his creation. That brings us back to the cross. At the cross God is for everyone. There, in Jesus, he deals with the whole human condition, and bears the cost of all the consequences of the way that creation is, because no one else can. And he is as passionate about people with disabilities as anyone else. The cross deals with everything that alienates us, or cuts us off, from God and each other. That definitely includes sin. But it also includes this complex mix of pain, loss and frustration. In Jesus, God deals with all of that, and everything that is positive about any life, whether lived with disability or not, is preserved and fulfilled through the resurrection.

Exploring this certainly stretches our thinking, but it is good to do so. It affirms that when we come to the point where God and his character are most revealed, we find that all people, including those with disabilities, are included in God's purposes from the outset. Subsequent posts will consider some of the questions raised here, and others, about disability in the Bible and in church. But they will do so with the benefit of this knowledge that the existence of disability is not inherently a badge of the Fall and the gospel really is for everyone.

2 The disability theologian John Swinton captures this sense that disability is just another way, or mode, of being human in his article 'Many Bodies, Many Worlds'. See this and related articles at: <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=92612>

3 When we talk about God's act of creation, we are always stretching our ideas and language considerably. This idea of God limiting himself, or in some way being willing to have a relationship with the 'nothingness' out of which he created is explored by various theologians. Two examples are: Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985), 9-15; and Eberhardt Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 184-219).

Discussion questions:

- If possible, it would be very good if there are people with disabilities that you can include in this discussion.
- What has been your experience of attitudes towards disabilities (physical or otherwise) in church? These might be positive or negative?
- What have you heard said about the suggestion that disability is a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3?
- The article suggested that what we find in Jesus and at the cross should shape all of our understanding of God and the Bible. What do you feel about that?
- What do you think about the idea that creation contains both a risk of sin and other risks and variety that can cause suffering but are not a result of sin?
- What do you think about the idea that at the cross Jesus deals with everything that cuts us off from God (sin and other experiences) and preserves all that is good through the resurrection?
- What does this suggest about assumptions we make around what a disabled person might ask God to change in their life?