

Christ, Community, and Calling

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Reading: John 9.1-41

When we talk at St Martin's about disability we explore experience and ideas around a number of themes. But some keep recurring. Is disability like an illness, from which you can hope to recover, or is it like a bereavement, which you can't change but have to find a way to live with, and, while it might never be something you'd choose, is something you can come to live a richer life because of and beyond? Is disability a problem mostly in the eye of the beholder, such that so-called disability is simply the name for being unusual in ways some people find uncomfortable, but you yourself mostly find just different? Are there things people who are different in these ways can actually perceive, understand and know better than other people, and if so, what sorts of things are they, and are they particularly pertinent to God's kingdom? And finally, what do we do with gospel stories that seem to see disability wholly negatively as a thing Jesus overcomes?

Those are the things I want to think with you about today. I want to enter the world of the ninth chapter of John's gospel, a seven-scene drama of healing, controversy and reversal, and see how it turns our ideas about disability, faith and knowledge inside out.

It's a busy story. Jesus heals a blind man. Then the neighbours interrogate the man. Then the Pharisees interrogate the man. Then the Pharisees interrogate the man's parents. Then the Pharisees interrogate the man again. Then Jesus speaks with the man. Finally Jesus speaks with the Pharisees. Think of it like a soap opera; except with life, the universe and everything at stake.

I want to suggest three levels on which we can read the story. The three levels are faith, discipleship, and transformation – or Christ, community and calling.

I'm going to call the first level 'Christ.' Jesus sees 'man' - in other words, humanity as a whole. Jesus sees a person in trouble. As 'man,' the man born blind is like a new Adam. Then Jesus makes mud out of earth and water, or technically saliva. This echoes the creation story. It combines water, from the first creation story, where in the beginning the Spirit hovers over the deep, with earth, from the second creation story, where God makes Adam out of the dust of the ground. Blindness is a metaphor. It represents the limitations of created humankind, the way people are unable to perceive who Jesus is, what God is really up to.

Then the man born blind washes in the pool of Siloam, which means 'sent.' This is an image of baptism. The man is baptised in water and becomes an apostle, a missionary – a person who's sent. And then he becomes the only person in the gospel who utters Jesus' code words – I am. Several times in the gospel of John Jesus says I am – I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd. This is how Jesus connects himself to the divine name – as God says to Moses, 'I am who I am.' By saying 'I am' the man embodies humanity understanding who Jesus is. It's an epiphany, a bit like when in the other gospels Peter says to Jesus, 'You are the Christ.' Interestingly when the man born blind speaks about Jesus he calls Jesus 'the man.' So this is a story about what happens when 'man,' or humanity, meets 'the man,' Jesus. And it takes place on the Sabbath, the day when creation is fulfilled and humanity and God are at peace.

It's not a sentimental story, because it's not an easy ride for the man born blind once he's washed in the pool of apostleship. Jesus comes to find the man when he's in trouble. Salvation isn't a oncefor-all thing: Jesus is around not just to set humanity free from exclusion, oppression, and suffering, but to support us in times of controversy and conflict. But note the way the man becomes the model of the Christian. All he knows is that once he was blind, but now he sees. In other words, all he knows is Jesus. It's not that he saw humanity and then Jesus: he saw Jesus and then came to understand humanity. It's not that he saw light and then saw Jesus: he saw Jesus and through him came to see the light. It's not that he saw life and then saw Jesus: he saw Jesus and then he saw life. Jesus isn't an additional, curious, sometimes jarring piece of information incidental to what we already know; what we know is Jesus, and everything else is incidental.

So the first level of the story, 'Christ,' is a cosmic account of what Jesus' coming means. Jesus comes to an unwary, ignorant, and suspicious world, brings a new creation of enlightenment, freedom and purpose, and sustains the community he brings about when it faces conflict. Now for the second level, which I'm going to call 'community.' We usually treat community as a motherhood-and-apple-pie word, full of warmth and belonging and cherishing. This is a story about community as a place of prejudice, stereotyping, narrow-mindedness and fear. It's a story about the man born blind in a series of communities — the disciples, the neighbours of upbringing and the neighbours of begging, the parents, and the Pharisees, some of whom are drawn to Jesus and some of whom most certainly are not.

For all of these people, the man born blind is a nuisance. The disciples get into a debate about whether suffering is about personal responsibility or structural injustice. Without even talking to the man they feel able to talk about the man in the abstract. They forget they're talking about a human being who can hear what they're saying and might just possibly have an opinion of his own. Then we come to the neighbours — those who saw him grow up and those who've begged beside him and known him in adulthood. Who does he think he is, they ask. How dare he break out of his stereotype? As if to put their anger on a larger stage, they involve the Pharisees. Today we might say, they go to the papers and publish the story, or maybe they tweet it, to maximize the audience for their outrage. The Pharisees couldn't care less about the man. They're looking for evidence to condemn Jesus. Then the Pharisees go to his parents. They're treating the man as a child. The parents are frightened and they hang their son out to dry.

Then the Pharisees go back to the man itself and it transpires that they have categories for how things should be and because the man doesn't fit those categories it must be him that's wrong not them. The categories are more important than the person in front of them. Then Jesus points out that this man is himself a prophet, highlighting to others the ways and works of God. And finally Jesus puts the Pharisees on the spot – some are drawn to him but can't face the reality and consequences of what he's doing. Jesus doesn't let them stay on the fence. At the start of the story the man born blind and his parents were in the dock. By the end, the tables have turned and it's the Pharisees who face judgement day.

For the third level of the story I'm going to use the word 'calling.' This is the story much more from the man's perspective. Unlike the disciples, he's not preoccupied with the question of causes in the past. He's captivated by the promise of purpose in the future. Jesus says, 'He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' And Jesus' message is consistent about not speculating about why and how, but just getting on and doing it. It's daytime — let's get on with God's work; night will come and then we'll have missed our chance. For the man born blind, this isn't fundamentally a story about healing. It's a story about empowerment. He starts the story as a beggar, in the grip of personal forces like his parents and neighbours and more social and political forces like the Pharisees. Jesus changes what's possible in his life. The man matches the Pharisees' obfuscation with the power of elegant simplicity. They know everything: he just knows one thing — but that one thing changes everything. He becomes the teacher who shows the experts how God

works and the prophet who challenges the critics about whether they want to become Jesus' disciples too. He starts the story as a problem – a philosophical problem to the disciples, a financial problem to his parents, a religious problem to the Pharisees. But he ends the story as a missionary, and evangelist, a prophet: an icon of the gospel.

And now it should be clear what this story is revealing to us about disability. On the surface we may be cross and say, it's about a man being healed of blindness, what's that saying to people who aren't healed of blindness, and what's it saying to people who don't see blindness as a form of deficit, but are happy in their own skin and imagine they'll be raised to everlasting life still blind but with the disadvantages of blindness taken away? How come this story portrays disability in a wholly negative light?

What we've seen is three levels to the story. The first level is about faith that's no different whether you're disabled or not. Jesus is the overflowing love of God that brings about a new creation and gives us freedom, grace, and peace, transforming our social relations and making us missionaries for his kingdom. That gospel is beyond anyone's personal circumstances. The second level is something many disabled people instantly identify with. It's about community and relationships and prejudice and how when a disabled person asserts their identity beyond a simple assumption of deficit it unsettles established stereotypes and disturbs comfortable discrimination. That's about going beyond being pitied and patronised and entering a new world of discovery and learning that not everyone's especially keen to participate in. When we say the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable this is precisely what we're talking about. And the third level is a journey that makes sense of why many disabled people see their lives as more fulfilling than a conventional life. It's about empowerment and vocation, about subversion and wisdom, about what only the blind can see and only the intellectually-impaired can know.

The third level is a thrilling, inspiring, and compelling invitation to take up Jesus' invitation to understand disability as a window onto the glory of God. The second level is a realistic assessment of the conflict, ostracism, exclusion, discomfort and distress of seeking dignity, realising identity, and finding a voice amidst a world that often doesn't want to see and isn't interested to know. The first level is a vision of who Christ is, what Christ does, and how we can be swept up into the wonders of God's grace. To be a disabled Christian is to know all three levels. At any one time we might be so taken up with one that we forget the others. But we need all three to read the Bible. And we need all three to be the church.