

Disability Sunday

11 August 1996 Preached at St Michael's and All Angels Kelburn, Wellington, 8am & 10am

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9-13; 1 Corinthians 15; Matthew 14: 22-33

In the name of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

In this address I am going to explore how our physical bodies reveal the image of God. Much of the inspiration for this has come from a book "The Disabled God; Towards a liberatory theology of Disability" written by a theologian with a disability.

Today's readings are about God coming to people in unusual guises. In the first reading God was not in the natural phenomena but in the silence. In the Gospel, the disciples in the darkness, take Jesus walking on the water to be a ghost and are afraid. We see later on in the story that it was Jesus embodied in flesh and blood. This account has strong similarities with the resurrection experiences of the disciples with Jesus. Jesus appears from nowhere to greet and reassure his followers that it was him and there was no need to fear.

In these accounts, Jesus Christ is presented not as a disembodied spirit but as a person who is embodied. Also, he encourages those present to do things that are extraordinary like walking on water.

The embodiment or the incarnation of God in Christ is a constant theme throughout the New Testament. Although the doctrine of the incarnation is central to Christianity, the church has often presented a romantic view of it bearing little resemblance to the reality of life in the human body. People who are disabled have found the romantic view of the incarnation is less than helpful. I suggest that for most people this view does not match our experience of life.

Often, in the Church, disability has been associated with need for healing, something to exclude people from full participation in ministry and in some traditions, it is still associated with sin and the devil. These attitudes have marginalised people with disabilities in the Church. As a person with a disability I have struggled with some theology because it has not helped me to see my body as being in the image of God. I rejoiced when I found the book "The Disabled God" because it makes the experience of disability worthy of theological enquiry.

The reexamination of the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection could help remind us that we are made in the image of God and are holy, whatever shape our bodies are in.

The church has taught that the resurrection is the overcoming of the physical world. While this teaching is true in one sense - because it points out that death is not the end - the resurrection also affirms the transformation of the physical body. Paul, in 1

Corinthians 15, speaks of the resurrection of the dead, and that physical bodies will be transformed from mortality to immortality.

In resurrection, Christ bears the image of God together with the wounds from the Cross. Christ shows that disability is part of transformation into the fullness of God. With these wounds, Christ became the disabled God. This is indeed an unusual guise for God to come in!

The disabled God reveals the ambivalent nature of living within human bodies - the joy and the pain at the same time. This is certainly an experience for even the fittest of us, who after a hard tramp, run, or swim, may feel great but have aching muscles! Another example of this ambivalence is when after an illness or injury, we have a sense of achievement when we manage to do some task again, even though it may have taken great effort.

Christ, through resurrection calls us to affirm the holiness of our bodies - warts, disabilities and all: learning to love our bodies just as they are. This learning involves accepting that our bodies are not invincible but have limitations. This is not to say we do not at time test the limits of our body. Through the encouragement of Jesus, Peter walked on water! At times, it is through the faith and encouragement of others that we are enabled to extend our limits. The other side of the coin is that we can disable others by our prejudice, and add to their exclusion from society.

Within the body of the disabled Christ both the truth of the incarnation and the promise of resurrection is seen. The truth of the incarnation is, in the recognition of the limitations of our human bodies. The promise of resurrection is, that in facing these limitations, we are not defeated - rather we seek transformation. This transformation is to include, rather than exclude, those parts of life that we find difficult. Transformation involves changing attitudes and actions that exclude people from participation in the community.

In the world of the media, the image of the body is everywhere. It is an idealized image that few people can attain. The theology of embodiment presents a challenge to this cultural icon by proclaiming that our real bodies contain the image of God. This is indeed good news for people who pursue the idealized body at the cost of their spiritual/emotional/physical health and well being. Also it provides hope for people whose bodies are disabled by affirming all bodies as being holy and in the image of God.

As we make Eucharist we are reminded that, through Christ's broken body, we are made whole and contain the image of God in our real bodies. May we be ready to see, hear, and feel God in this action.

Vicki Terrell

References:

Eiesland Nancy L [The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability:](#) Abingdon Press, Nashville:1994.