

# **SIN and DISABILTY**

**Lent Four**

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

**John 9:1-41**



Imagine living in a society where being in a wheelchair was no more remarkable than wearing glasses, where a person who is unable to see can cast a secret ballot at a polling place during an election, where a person with an intellectual disability can as easily find a job as anyone else, and where a person qualifying for disability support no longer has to live with the threat of losing that support or being the subject of ridicule suggesting they are actually on the “take”?

Despite our so-called enlightened society, myths and prejudices surround our understanding and our approach to disability. Some years ago a friend of mine was refused entry into an entertainment venue because security personal claimed he was intoxicated. My friend was actually suffering from a neurological disorder.

Meanwhile we claim to enjoy the services of an extensive public transport system when only 40% of our railway stations are accessible to mobility impaired people and only one in two buses on the Sydney system are accessible if you are in a wheelchair. And I wonder how we, here in West Epping, shape up when it comes to such issues? I am aware the journey from the car park to the church or the trek up the stair into the cottage can be taxing for some.

The world around presents us with ideals, with things we strive for and things we ultimately value. And, sadly, the image of the perfect body and the image of the perfect mind are two of them. Such images serve as a “standard” or “plumb line” against which everything else is measured. Moreover, if you don’t measure up to these so-called “ideals” then , somehow, you are less than “perfect”, you are less “able” or, at worst, you are in some way “deviant”.

In Jesus' day people with disabilities were seen as outsiders, as less than perfect and, in many ways, as "deviant" persons. Such people lived on the fringes of society.

They were often seen to be devil-possessed while the dominant view claimed they had sinned. Their disability was said to be the consequence of human transgressions against a God who was duly punishing them!

In the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament the people of Israel were constantly chastised for their sins. Such disobedience led to blindness, disease and even death. The ancient kings of Israel didn't get off either. King Jeroboam was struck down with paralysis due to his negligence (1 Kings 13:4) while King Uzziah suffered from leprosy because of his unfaithfulness to God (2 Chronicles 26:16-23).

Blindness was seen as a particularly serious curse. It was associated with ignorance and with unbelief. Throughout the ancient world the most degrading thing that could be said of a kingdom or a nation was that it was "blind".

Hence, disability is understood to be the result of God's curse. This is reinforced by the idea that disability is somehow linked with immorality. Here the holiness code in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus claims physical disability is a distortion of the divine image. It's an inherent desecration of all things "holy" and because of this priests and "holy people" of the day had to avoid contact with anyone who was disabled in this way.

Now, even Jesus seemed to associate disability with sin. Mark 2:1-12 records that incredible story set in Capernaum where a sick person is lowered down through the roof of a house where Jesus is teaching, Upon seeing the man Jesus exclaims "*your sins are forgiven.*" And immediately the man stands up. He is freed of the paralysis that plagued him for so long as he walks away mat in hand.

Then in John 5 Jesus encounters a person who cannot walk. This particular guy is lying among the porticoes at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. And upon healing this fellow Jesus instructs him to "*sin no more.*"

Sin and disability - the traditional view here is that we are all fallen, less than perfect creatures who are tainted with original sin. In other words, the so-called inherent ability of humankind to do the wrong thing by God, thereby invoking God's curse, is an explanation for the predicament we face today.

But I struggle with this. I really struggle. Having had some experience of schizophrenia in my family together with cognitive learning difficulties and a history of chronic neurological disorders, I pause to ask the question, what sin has my parents, my grandparents or indeed, my great grandparents committed to bring this on? What acts of immorality have attributed to this? What has my family done to invoke God's curse?

And I am sure you, too, ask these same questions. For, we are all faced with such situations. We get sick, we experience the often traumatic decline of loved ones, and we die.

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Now, it may appear we are loggerheads with what the Bible says. But this morning we encounter a new approach. We are drawn to a radical redrafting, a profound reversing of the tradition as Jesus literally turfs out any notion that sin is responsible for disability.

The scenario unfolds as Jesus meets up with a blind man. Blindness is a condition the man has had since birth and Jesus' disciples ask the predictable question: *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

Jesus' response is shocking as much as it's startling – and it proves to be a ground-breaking move: *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned."*

Note: *"Neither this man nor his parents have sinned"!*



Sin and disability – here the two issues get a comprehensive makeover as Jesus frees this man from the edict that says sin causes disability. Moreover, Jesus becomes, in the eyes of the authorities, a sinner himself as he breaks the law by healing on the Sabbath. And the religious leaders, come moral guardians of the day, are then accused of wrongdoing.

With all this talk about sin – it gets a little complicated as everyone is accused of sinning at some point in the story!

Sabbath prohibitions include a range of work-related activities including ploughing, reaping, threshing, sifting, baking and kneading. And what does Jesus do? – he “kneads” a mixture of saliva and soil to form a mud substance that is spread on the man’s eyes. And in the language of the day – Jesus breaks the rules!

This leads to a stream of accusations from the Pharisees who claim Jesus cannot possibly be doing God’s work. Indeed, they question the blind man’s testimony and finally drive him out in utter frustration.

The story ends as Jesus turns the issue back on the Pharisees themselves. For, in their narrow, pious indebtedness to the tradition, the Pharisees fail to see and understand the God they so jealously defend. They are, in fact, the real sinners!

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Friends, Jesus' intention here, as he heals the blind man, is to capture our attention and point us to the true nature of God. And this is a God who does not want to curse. This is a God who does not chose to condemn. This is a God who refuses to bind God's people to a string of rigid rules and regulations based on cause and effect.

And friends, the crux of the matter here is this - sin and disability are not related!

For, the God we encounter this morning is a God who actively seeks out those who are vulnerable. The God who we affirm each day is a God who lovingly pursues those who are ill, those who are struggling and those who are different. The God who we worship today is a God whose true nature is one of mercy and grace!

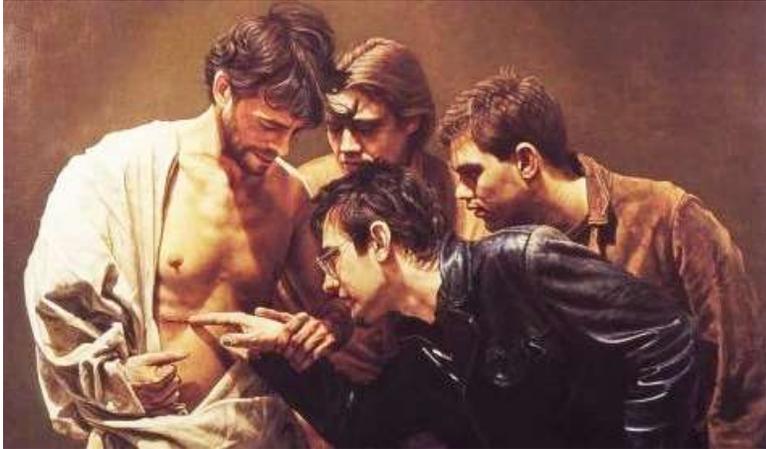
Nancy Eiesland was born in North Dakota USA with a congenital bone defect. After going through numerous operations in her youth, Nancy realized she would have to live with the pain for the rest of her life. Nancy died in 2009 aged just 44. However her Christian witness and subsequent theological insights cannot be overlooked.

Nancy served as Associate Professor at Emory University Atlanta in the department of theology. In all her theological discourse, she didn't speak about a causal link between sin and disability. Nancy knew Jesus had put an end to that!



Rather, Nancy referred to what she calls the "Disabled God". Nancy is not dishonouring God in any way. Rather, Nancy points to God's Son who, a week after his resurrection, continues to bear the wounds of torture and execution. This is witnessed by Thomas and others as they view the crucified, disabled hands and the pieced, hollowed side of their risen Lord.

Nancy also speaks about Holy Communion where we remember Jesus' death and receive symbols of the body and blood of Christ. In this we acknowledge the Son of God's body was broken and his blood was poured out for us.



Friends, in all of this we do not encounter a remote, all-powerful, majestic, super good-looking God. Rather, the God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ is a God who is wounded. This is a God who suffers torment and pain. This is a God who knows what it is to be human!

This is Nancy Eiesland's "Disabled God". And in Nancy's most eloquent words: *"divinity is fully compatible with disability"*.

So, in this most amazing story concerning the healing of the blind man we can dismiss any causal relationship between sin and disability. And in doing so, we actually learn a lot of new things about God.

We do so as Matthew's Gospel records: *"Great crowds came to him, bringing with them lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them."* (Matthew 15:30).

Friends, we learn here that a critical part of Jesus' ministry was always directed towards those people who were disabled or ostracised in some way. For example, when Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in his home town synagogue in Nazareth, he goes on to say: *"he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind"* (Luke 4:18).

Rather than condemning those who are disabled or giving them a *raison d'être* for their condition, Jesus' mission is one directed at challenging vexatious traditions and dismissing onerous dictates that simply marginalise people.

Moreover, Jesus' proclamation is one that involves the lifting of punishing conventions, conventions that rob people of their humanity. Jesus does so with the purpose of restoring people to their rightful place in the community - just like the blind man in our story as he returns to his place and his neighbours without the need to beg on the street.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today the Good News is that God does not punish us with sickness or with disability.

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Moreover, God does not adhere to worldly standards concerning physical or mental perfection. Rather, God knows the very stuff of our humanity. God does so because God bears our wounds, God carries our traumas and God experiences our fears.

There are no simple answers here. The healing that Jesus offers is not a quick, indeed, it's not a magical "fix". As Nancy Eiesland experienced, the pain didn't go away and she did die young.

Rather, healing in the way God intends is all about being brought into a binding relationship with the God who loves us. It's all about being gifted with God's mercy and grace, a mercy and grace that breaks down stereotypes, bridges divisions and erases prejudices. God does all this to assure us that, who we are and what experience today, is of ultimate concern and value to God.

And this healing does not take place in isolation. Rather, as a Christian community God calls each one of us to defy human attempts to link sin with disability. God challenges each and every one of us to create spaces for all people, no matter what their physical or mental state may be. God summons all of us to live in community where the image of the divine is identified and respected in the faces of every person we meet.

Sin as cause for disability is bunkum!

Jesus changes all that. So, listen to him, follow him and know he is there for you now and always.

Amen.



**John Barr**