

In His Image

A theological rationale for ministry for and by people with a disability

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The cult of Ability

Let me begin by asking a question: Who is the most impressive person you know? Who is it, in your estimation, that stands head and shoulders above the remainder of humanity? Now, take a moment to think – what is it about he or she that you admire so much? Is there something that stands out, or is it a unique blend of almost indefinable characteristics that makes them beautiful in your eyes?

We live in a world and a society that on the whole is very impressed by people's abilities. If I was to ask my opening question of Aussie Joe or Mary in Martin Place, they would almost certainly name someone who is exceptional in their field. A musician, an academic, a sportsperson, an entrepreneur – maybe, just maybe a politician; we admire ability in a wide range of disciplines, but it is ability of some sort that is admired and applauded.

We see this reflected in people's income. I had a 15 minute consultation with my heart specialist the other day, for that privilege Medicare paid my doctor \$100. Because of his very special abilities, we as a society value that man's time at \$400 an hour. On the other hand, my mother, who works as a nurse's aid among elderly folk with dementia, is paid \$12 an hour. She is considered unskilled; she has relatively little ability. And, of course, we are all aware of the vast amounts of money our leading sportsmen and CEO's and movie stars are paid for their exceptional abilities.

This, what I have called the *Cult of Ability*, is entrenched in popular Western culture: from the HSC to the Academy Awards to the Olympics it is everywhere. This movement has articulate spokesmen and impressive academic credentials. One of my research interests is a lady called Helga Kuhse, a Melbourne academic who did her PhD under the supervision of Peter Singer. She has this to say about what it is that makes human life worthwhile:

I am suggesting that there are two main values to which human life gives rise: pleasurable states of consciousness & and the value of autonomy or self-determination.¹

Admittedly, these are fairly basic abilities – to feel pleasure, to make decisions, but my point is that worth, value, significance is tied to ability. I have noticed this attitude creeping into the disability culture also as we are urged not to focus on people's disabilities, but their abilities. The Governor General at the October 1999 Southern Cross Disability Games here in Sydney said: The ability shown to compete far outweighs their disabilities. Yet even here, we see people are valued on the basis of what they are able to do.

This philosophy has far reaching implications. I have already raised the issue of wage inequality, let me point out a couple more examples. We have a soaring divorce rate in our society, due at least in part to a growing unwillingness on the part of a husband or wife to persevere in the relationship when their counterpart's *ability* to & please them, excite them, interest them has reached its use-by date. There are radical implications here for our thinking about abortion and euthanasia. Helga Kuhse's stance leads to this kind of conclusion: Infants – like some severely retarded or brain damaged patients & do not have a right to life and

¹ Helga Kuhse, *The Sanctity-of-Life Doctrine in Medicine: A Critique*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 217.

killing them is not directly wrong.² In other words, they are so disabled; their very lives are forfeit.

The issue at hand for us today is our care for, our Christian ministry among people with disabilities. Membership of this Cult of Ability translates into very practical attitudes and behaviour towards people with disabilities: avoidance, school-yard bullying, embarrassment, an unwillingness to invest time in, an unwillingness to learn from someone with a disability because, by definition, we are less significant people. We know this is not right; we instinctively recoil at the suggestion that we could possibly treat people like that. But &Why? If you see people through the glasses of ability, that is perfectly consistent behaviour.

Is there another way of understanding who we are as people? Indeed there is! an understanding as old as the Bible. In the time that remains, I am going to ask you to see the world through God's eyes - to listen again to what God has been saying for thousands of years about who we are as people. And as we do this, I am hoping we will come to understand why Christian ministry for and by people with disabilities is critical. First we need to understand:

Who we are in Creation.

The opening chapter of the Bible tells how God, long ago, shaped and filled our universe. Everything that we now delight in on planet Earth was given its existence and its niche in the Created order by God. In the poetic account of creation, mankind stands as the pinnacle of everything God has made. There is something very special about humanity. Genesis 1:26

²⁶ Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.³

From these verses we learn that being in God's image is about *rule* and *relationship*. We humans rule over the rest of Creation, like God rules over all. And we humans are male and female, capable of relationship with one another and with our Creator, as God has relationship within Himself - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Notice carefully that these privileges come from God's decision about who we are humans - not on the basis of any particular abilities .

It is true that in Genesis 1 we have an idyllic situation. All is well with the world, God can look at all He has made and say - it is very good . The Bible moves on in Genesis 3 to tell of an unthinkable revolt - mankind's rebellion against their Creator. God responds with swift words of judgment: the orderliness of creation is frustrated; there will now be selfishness and anguish and back-breaking labour. Here is the world of disability and death - the world we know so well.

But even in the new world order outside the Garden of Eden, mankind continues to image God. Genesis 5 (v1-3), Genesis 9 (v6), in a world increasingly broken by the effects of sin, humanity is said to be in the image of God. Relationships are dysfunctional, rule is frustrated; the image is marred almost beyond recognition - but in God's kindness, humanity continues to be in His image .

Let's make the obvious application of these truths to our discussion: every human being, no matter how disabled, is made in the image of God. Yes, we are caught up in this world of sin

² Kuhse, *The Sanctity-of-Life Doctrine in Medicine*, 218.

³ Holy Bible, *New International Version*.

and judgment every human being is we are dying creatures; but we have a dignity and a worth given to us by the very words of God: let us make mankind in our image.

When I listen to my friend Jason as he struggles through his cerebral palsy to make clear words, I am listening to an image bearer. As I sit with my friend Lorraine who is regularly paralyzed with anxiety, I am alongside an image bearer. Woe to me if I dismiss these ones because they are less able! They bear, we each bear, the stamp of God on our lives and for this reason alone we must make every effort to include people with disabilities in the life of God's people. But there are more reasons to come. Secondly, we need to understand:

Who we can be in Jesus

I noticed that Peter Wier's classic *Gallipoli* was on the TV again the other night. The main characters are a likable bunch young, fun-loving, fiercely committed to their country and to their mates; in a roughish way they are noble characters. And yet they are pitted against an enemy that is far stronger than they are. Finally, in spite of great heroism, they are destroyed. And we who watch are left empty everything seems meaningless when death has the last word. So too we might ask: How meaningful it is really to say we are noble image bearers, if sickness and death have the last word in our lives?

2000 years ago a man who would change everything stepped into history. Jesus born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, had a public ministry for a short time throughout Palestine. In his teaching Jesus made a number of startling claims he claimed to be able to forgive people's sins, to restore people back to right relationship with God⁴. He claimed to be able to give people life to the full⁵ and eternal life with God after Jesus had raised people from the dead⁶. Jesus gave proof of his authority to do these things by healing the sick and raising the dead⁷. He underwent the agony of death himself bearing the penalty for sin that is our just deserts⁸ and then he triumphed over death forever in his resurrection from the tomb on the third day⁹.

Jesus is the true image of the invisible God¹⁰. Faithful, gracious, compassionate, good, Jesus demonstrates perfect relationship with God and other people. Exalted to the right hand of God, waiting for all opposition to be subdued before him, Jesus is the perfect ruler of the world. And in Jesus only in Jesus, the way has been opened for the healing of broken humanity. As we come to Jesus, as we rest in his accomplishments and abilities, we are renewed in the image of God¹¹.

The Cult of Ability rears its ugly head in religion also in any teaching that affirms good works as a means of impressing God, or spiritual disciplines, or church rituals or ecstatic experience. Jesus has alone done everything to turn aside God's anger and win heavenly life for us. Our response is simply to depend on Jesus.

From my perspective as a disabled man, this is the most exciting news. I can be right with God, I can be the person I was created to be because Jesus has the ability to rescue me. I don't need to be a fast runner. I don't need to be a sharp thinker. I don't even need to speak or move or be a good person: because Jesus has done it all.

⁴ Mark 2:1-12; John 14:1-6

⁵ John 10:10

⁶ John 3:16; 5:24-30

⁷ See for e.g. Mark 2:1-12; 3:21-43.

⁸ Mark 10:45; Romans 3:21-26.

⁹ Acts 2:31-36; Romans 6:9; 2 Timothy 1:10

¹⁰ Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10.

Knowing this truth about Jesus changes my thinking about disability in a couple of ways. It firstly exposes the Cult of Ability as a fraud. Winning an Olympic gold medal, a Nobel prize, an Academy award or all of the above does not count for the forgiveness of sins. Without faith in Christ, people are desperately needy, whether they realize it or not. So human ability pales into insignificance next to human guilt before God.

And secondly, being forgiven by God in Christ transforms my experience of disability. Sure, my muscles may be wasting away and I may spend much of my adult life in a wheelchair but because of Jesus I can pray to my heavenly Father, I am learning to love my enemies, I am filled with hope for the future. These things at the heart of what it means to be human are mine in abundance through Jesus.

Let me sum up this second section: because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, people with disabilities can be fully-fledged members of God's people. In God's eyes we stand shoulder to shoulder with every other believer – we are sinners saved by God's grace alone. This too must provoke us to a ministry for and by people with disabilities.

God's Word teaches us who we are in creation and who we can be in Jesus. Finally, we must also understand &

Who we will be in God's new Creation

Here is a verse from the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul is describing our hope as Christians:

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.¹²

The day of Jesus' return is drawing near. It will be a day of judgment for all who have despised the Lord Jesus. But it will also be a great day of making new. The Bible goes so far as to say that the present heavens and earth will be destroyed to be replaced by a new heavens and earth – the home of righteousness¹³. This passage from Philippians says that the physical bodies of Christian people will be caught up in this renewal. Our lowly, decaying, disabled bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus' glorious, resurrection body¹⁴.

What that body will be like we only know in outline. We will still be human but imperishable. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, the book of Revelation says; There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.¹⁵

This is the fulfillment of the Christian hope. The Christian message is not about downgrading the physical and playing up the spiritual side of life so that we who have a disability can somehow feel better about ourselves. Heaven is an intensely physical reality. And we Christians will be fitted out for heaven with eternal, resurrection bodies. As I said, the Bible doesn't give us many details; but from what it does say I would expect that blind eyes will see, muddled brains will become crystal clear, frozen joints will glide like silk. The old order of things will have passed away.

¹² Philippians 3:20-21, *NIV*.

¹³ 2 Peter 3:10-13.

¹⁴ See also 1 Corinthians 15:35-53

¹⁵ Revelation 21:4.

Here is deep and lasting hope to hold out to people with disabilities: every spiritual blessing in Christ now, and life to the full beyond the grave. What an incredible privilege to announce such news to those who in this world's eyes have really very little future!

I can clearly remember a meeting I had with a group of doctors about 10 years ago. There were three doctors, all of them specialists and highly respected in their field. They had the latest in medical knowledge at their fingertips. They had examined me and run a barrage of tests. I asked them whether there was any medical way of improving my condition. There was a long silence, they looked at each other and shifted in their chairs. Finally one said; There's nothing, at the moment we can do to help. That's it - thanks for coming!

But as a Christian, as a Christian minister, I can speak to people of their ultimate healing and their eternal life in Paradise with God. The pain and suffering of Christian people will only last - at the most, for a lifetime.

Knowing who we will be in God's new creation also helps me to treat people with the respect they deserve. It is helpful at many times in life to know who it is you are dealing with. A number of years ago now, I heard about a man who worked at a swimming pool. He was told by his boss to mark off a section of the pool and keep all of the public swimmers out of that area. The man did as he was told, and a while later he noticed one lady swimming up and down in that special area. Well he went over, told her off, ordered her out of the pool, only to have his boss race over and inform him that this was Diana - Princess of Wales.

I think it was Charles Spurgeon who said that if we could see now what God will make of the Christians we care for, we would be overwhelmed with a desire to fall on our knees and worship them. People with disabilities often look strange and ugly in the eyes of our contemporaries. We may behave in a bizarre way, we may smell bad - but if you could see now what God will one day make us to be, you would treat us with the respect we deserve. Knowing who we will be in God's new Creation also spurs us on to ministry for and by people with disabilities.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning to where I began: Who is the most impressive person you know? If you belong to the Cult of Ability, you may well choose some high-flyer. I hope I have been able to persuade you of the bankruptcy and foolishness of that particular philosophy of life.

If you are willing to look with God's eyes, you will see there is only One truly impressive man in the history of the world - a man who won life to the full for rebels by submitting himself to a painful and humiliating death on a cross. But once we have seen that man, and confessed Him to be Lord of all, we notice there are countless others, all around us who have been created to be like Jesus, whom Jesus has lived and died for, who will one day be transformed into the glorious likeness of Jesus if only they would turn and trust Him. Some of those countless others will have a disability; and what an awesome privilege to tell them too about Jesus! May God bless you in your efforts to proclaim the Lord Jesus.

Christian Disability Partnership in Australia

Post - PO Box 120, Thornleigh, NSW 2120

Web - www.pastornet.net.au/crossrds/cdp

Email - xroads@pastornet.net.au

Phone - 02 9980 8911

Fax - 02 9875 4002