

A Sermon for Disability Awareness Sunday

With thanks to “Through the Roof” for statistics and thoughts.

(readings Luke 5:17 – 26 and Matthew 22:1 – 14)

The third Sunday in November – today - has been designated by the Archbishop of Armagh as Disability Awareness Sunday in the Church of Ireland.

The purpose for having a specific Sunday in the Church year is to raise everyone’s awareness of disability and to celebrate the ability of people with disabilities.

Let me paint a picture of a mythical nation;

If it were possible to gather together all the disabled people in the world into one nation, that nation would number about 650 million men, women and children. That’s more than ten times the population of the United Kingdom. The nation would be the third largest in the world after China and India.

That nation would have some unique characteristics. It would.

- Have the least access to education**
- Have the lowest proportion in the world of its population in employment**
- Be the poorest nation on earth**
- Have the least access to transport**
- Be the least evangelised nation with the lowest proportion involved in a church**

Would this be the sort of nation you would want you, a friend or family member to be part of?

In Northern Ireland there are about a quarter of a million people with a disability and in the Republic of Ireland there are well over half a million. In this parish that means that there are possibly about XX people with disability. Does the congregation here on a Sunday reflect this?

Don't forget that if each disabled person has only one person caring for them there are so many more people affected by disability. Think about it, if your husband, wife, child or parent who is in a wheelchair user couldn't get into church then the whole family can't get into church.

Disability isn't just about wheelchairs though. Less than 10% of people with a disability are wheelchair users. There are many more hidden problems that people have that may disable them in some way. Hearing loss or mental illness for example. 50,000 people in Northern Ireland and around 125,000 in the Republic use hearing aids.

In relation to mental ill health 1 in 3 of us will experience mental health difficulties at some time in our lives.

As Christians we need to understand the issues that both disabled people and their carers face. The sad reality is that our churches often reflect societies lack of understanding and care for these people.

So why don't we see more disabled people in our churches? One reason is that our society traditionally approaches disability from what's called the medical model of disability. This model sees

disabled people as ‘having a problem’, which needs ‘fixing or curing’. The emphasis is on what is ‘wrong’ with them, and they are treated as in need of healing or in need of pity and having to be cared for. This has often led to disabled people losing control over their lives.

The grace in sign language

(You may wish to find someone in the parish or wider community to either teach you this before the sermon so as you can communicate it or ask someone to come on the day and take part in the sermon)

Not many if any of you will have a clue what I just communicated to you. How did that make you feel? Maybe you were confused, uncomfortable or felt excluded. You have just stood in the shoes of someone who is disabled for a few seconds; disabled people have to live in those shoes for all of their lives. Maybe this is another reason we don’t see disabled people in our churches – they feel excluded or marginalized.

Let us take a few minutes to learn how to sign the Grace.

Jesus gave a high priority to people with disabilities.

In the Gospels there are 35 miracles recorded. 23 of these involved disabled people. 6 were about people with mental illness and 17 involved people with physical disability – including blindness,

deafness, a withered hand, leprosy and the paralysed man that we heard about in our first reading this morning.

In the story of the paralysed man that we heard read this morning, Jesus teaches us about our responsibility with disabled people. In the time of the story houses were built of stone and had flat roofs made of mud mixed with straw. Outside stairways led to the roof. The mans 4 friends realised that they couldn't get near Jesus with the man by getting into the house by normal means, so they took the outside route and made enough of a hole in the roof to get to the man to Jesus. The man would never have got to Jesus by himself; he needed the help of his friends. They recognised his needs and did something about it. When we see someone in need do we act? We can all help people with a disability just like the 4 friends in the Gospel story.

There is one disability we all have in common and that is the spiritual disability of sin. Jesus clearly tells us that the most important disability to deal with is that of sin.

He stressed in the story of the paralysed man that the most important part of healing was the forgiveness of that sin. Although the man was healed physically as well as spiritually we don't know about his future physical health but we do know that he was spiritually well for eternity.

Our second reading this morning teaches us that God's house will only be filled when it includes marginalized people, those who are poor, the disabled and the outsiders. The passage doesn't say that

they have to be healed; they just are to be included. It is important that we as a church make sure all are welcomed here.

Practically what can you as a part of the body of Christ do in this parish to continue to help people with a disability? I know from talking to your rector that you are already very aware of issues relating to how accessible your buildings are and are currently working on that.

Why not develop this a little further by putting together a group to look at how people with various disabilities in the wider parish can be included as a part of God's family.

Don't forget those who don't come regularly to worship here or those who can't get to other events that are organised by the parish. And of course don't forget visitors and new people to the area. This is a real and tangible way to make sure that all people in the local area can feel included and welcome in the full Christian life of this parish.

Although this is disability awareness Sunday it shouldn't just be a single day in the year. This Sunday should be a celebration of our ministry in disability and it should be a time to stop and think how that ministry can be improved in the coming year.

95% of us will experience a disability at some time in our lives. That is nearly all of us. Disability awareness is about all of us here and in the wider Church.

Disabled people are part of earthly families, make sure that we make them part of the family of this church and the family of God.

AMEN