

## Inclusive Church - Disability

“We believe in inclusive Church – a church which celebrates and affirms every person and does not discriminate. We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on the grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.”

Psalm 89: 1-13

John 8:35 - 41

You're the word of God the father

14 All Heaven Declares

394 O worship the lord in the beauty of holiness

479 The God of love my shepherd is

207 Heaven shall not wait

So we're talking about whether we are an inclusive church, whether we want to join the inclusive church organisation.

And one of the things they ask us to look at is disability.

Are we inclusive to people with disability?

So what its about Simon, what can we do?

I mean, is it about the practicalities? I used to work in a care home, when I was 18. And it had 30 residents with cerebral palsy, MS, muscular dystrophy - all sorts. And when we went out with some of the older residents, in their wheelchairs, you noticed how difficult it was to just do ordinary things - like, you couldn't go on a bus, there were often steps into shops - and not enough room in shops to get round in a wheelchair. And then everything was at the wrong height.

And if you go into a pub, its like being a child - in a wheelchair, your head doesn't even reach teh counter.

Disability is not just wheelchairs though, its it? A person whose epilepsy is triggered by certain sounds / tones never heard of it before - certain music ok, certain is not ok — can't go into shops, unless they turn the music down. So this person might have been called handicapped in the past, and we might have said - becuae they're handicapped they can't go in the shops - but of course that's not true. Its not their disability that's handicapping them, its the noise in the shop.

Or my friend in teh wheelchair, its the building that's handicapping them, limiting them, not their illness or disability.

So we should do a building audit to make sure as far as reasonably possibly our building does not handicap people from coming in.

Interesting - handicap / disabled. We use these words without much thought - if they don't apply to you or affect you, like all words. This is how we all interact with the world.

But our words might be a problem. Our words might be a handicap, especially in church.

Think about our reading - John 8 - the man born blind. The pharisees are asking if he's blind because he sinned, but when Jesus heals him, and when he speaks to the pharisees, and when John talks about it - he uses blindness and sight for metaphors about our spiritual lives.

If you're spiritually blind, you can't see the truth about Jesus. And it's not a matter of trying harder, or being clever or having enough faith - you'll never see, unless you get your sight.

Which all of us here are fine with. But if you are the John Hull - an amazing guy I knew in Birmingham, and who gradually went blind from his 40's onwards. Well he says he finds it a big insult.

I mean, he's kind of ok, but he thinks that other blind people could find it difficult, if one of the things about them that they can't change, is used to say whether people are good or bad.

And worse, it's implied that you have a choice - over whether to be one thing or another.

Imagine if this story was about people who were black or white.

Amazing Grace might go like this:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That brought me to the light,  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was black, but now I'm white.

And we wouldn't sing that, would we?

Yet we seem happy to portray people with disability in a very negative light.

Not only do we say "the blind" or "the deaf" as if people have no identity other than their physical disability, we then use those single physical attributes to label them.

So the work of being inclusive is not just about adapting our buildings or our services so they're not a problem, not a handicap. It might also be about thinking about other things, like the words we use.

The language we use to talk about people is of course hugely significant.

The words that we used to describe coloured people only 50 years ago, would get you arrested now. Words change meaning, and value. We don't speak like they did in Jane Austen's time or Shakespeare's.

Words carry power, they matter.

So the ways we've talked about disabled people have changed greatly for the better in the last 50 years.

Not long ago someone who couldn't walk would be called a cripple. And that wasn't nice or good.

Someone who lacked mental capacity would be called feeble minded, a moron, an imbecile.

Language changes. Moron is a medical definition, but then was used as general insult for people with or without mental capacity, and now its out of fashion.

People used to talk about “the disabled”  
Dis-abled...

Someone less-abled, or  
but now some people prefer to say “someone with a disability” - I don’t want you to think that’s my whole character.

Some people don’t like the whole negative connotation of disabled.  
They prefer “challenged” - physically challenged, visually challenged.  
(John says he’s not visually challenged, he can’t see anything, so he’s blind!)

Some people would like to be called - Differently abled  
We all have different abilities - not all can run or swim or see as well - so we’re all differently abled.  
That makes us more equal.  
And if we can speak about people equally we might be able to treat people equally.

Others want to go further - why assume there’s some normal and the disabled are the ones who are ‘not normal’. How would we all like it if were lumped together as a group. Given that all of us may have a dodgy hip or an illness or something which renders us disabled - aren’t we really talking about those who are ‘temporarily able bodied’ against those who are not.

So how are we going to speak to people, or change our liturgy or the words we use. Some people want one thing, some want others.. agghh - just tell me what to say!

How do you feel about all this?  
Do you feel its a fuss over nothing?  
Or a paper exercise?

I wonder if you’re a little bit frustrated (heaven forbid christians should get cross, or ever angry!)  
(Heaven does not forbid - I can name 3 times Jesus was angry!)

But if your blood is just 1 degree warmer - then that’s good.

But being inclusive is not simply about putting in a ramp or using large print service sheets.  
And its not even about thinking about some stuff.

Its about inner work - engaging with how someone’s difference makes me feel. How do I feel about blind or deaf people? Am I cross with them - I wish Simon would just tell us about God.

Why do I feel like that?  
Why does the fact I have to change upset me?

This is the hard stuff.

In the meantime.

And we need to listen to people - to their experience. One person is ok with joking about being in a wheelchair, another isn't. What's it actually like to be deaf or blind.

This isn't a box-ticking exercise. Being inclusive means being open to change.

And change takes time.

You have to get to know someone, to listen to them, to walk alongside them,

You have to be friends, and in relationship.

So I've talked about our words make disability a problem, we paint being blind, or deaf, or having down's syndrome as a problem - like its worse, its less.

But that is not everybody's' experience at all. It is not the deafness that is hard, its other people.

They don't all see their cerebral palsy as bad or negative - its just part of them.

Even when its negative - its their identity.

Which brings me to God...

There's so much more I want to say, so much more to think about - but.. a couple of last open ended questions....

Our image of God.

God who is perfect - that must be true...

But when the bible talks about God's perfection, when we think about it, sing about it

We say things like -

When the Bible says -

Teh voice of the lord is powerful, breaking cedars - it says in Psalm 29

His strong right arm, we heard about today

How does that make you feel if you can't speak

Or if you don't have a strong right arm?

If being physically perfect is held up as the ideal?

(That's not a simple yes no thing - think about it, sit with it)

And what about Jesus? He was wounded, marred, broken - and yet, loved and in heaven, What a great example.

Yet - all those healings raises problems for those who see the disabled as fodder for their healing services.

Yeah - so many questions, so much to think about and process, and pray about.

I know, aren't you glad its just Messy Church next week!