

Why Disability Sunday?

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St James' 8am and 10am Services

18 June 2023

May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you God our rock and redeemer.

Here we are again in the one Sunday of the year dedicated to disability matters.

In fact, every Sunday, and every day of the year should be dedicated to this topic. Why? Well that is the topic of this sermon really.

Let's do a little poll:

Who here identifies as having a disability? This could be physical or mental or a mixture of both.

Statistics show that in the population there are at least 23% of people with disabilities. In our age group I would expect it to be much more.

We know that as we age, we develop disabilities, or we are born with them.

I have both visible and non-visible disabilities. I have had neck surgery which means I should not be lifting heavy things, and it is why Amanda bars me from lifting boxes of books. It results in pain for the week or two afterwards.

I have had other surgery which went wrong and led to a medical misadventure claim, and my ankle will never be the same after I broke it in Hong Kong a few years ago.

These are disabilities that I have developed since I was born. Some people though are born with disabilities.

Ableism refers to bias, prejudice, and discrimination against people with disabilities. It hinges on the idea that people with disabilities are less valuable than nondisabled people. This can lead to outright discrimination or not considering the needs of everyone.

Over many years I have developed an interest in the rights of people with disabilities, and we have others in the Parish who share this.

So, what comes under the list of disability?

I have spoken on this topic a few times before, so you will be aware that when I talk about disability, I am including physical disability and intellectual disability, dementia, schizophrenia, brain injury and so on.

One of the reasons I am involved with rest home ministry is that I believe that as a community, we should be taking the Gospel out into the community, and providing for worship and prayer where it is easier for people to attend. Not forgetting about people once they go into a rest home or hospital.

In terms of worship spaces, not only do we have this space and the chapel, and All Saints', but did you know we also have a Chapel at Enliven and Shona MacFarlane and the New Masonic Hospital which our parishioners (and others) worship at.

This Church building is just not that accessible in lots of ways to those with a disability. Zoom goes a little way towards helping those at home who are unable to attend, but it doesn't allow for the social interaction we all need as a family of Christ.

Our one disability toilet is not adequate and anyone using it feels like they are interrupting the service if they go to use it. Our ramp is not suitable to be used by someone unaided and we have steps and hazards on the way into the church. One bug bear of mine is how is a person in a wheelchair is going to access the sanctuary area to preach, preside, offer communion to others, to sing in the Choir or play in the band?

We still have a lot to do internally to be truly welcoming to those with disabilities.

So, let's look at the theology of disability and then I will move on to what is happening in New Zealand which recognises that theology and the rights of people with disabilities.

### The Theology

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God : Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 24

Often those with mental disabilities or profound physical disabilities are treated as what some would call non-persons. They are also often restricted in the facilities and areas that they can access or parts they can play.

According to Nancy Eiesland a theologian, who was herself profoundly disabled, "people with disabilities are distinguished not because of our shared physical, psychological, or emotional traits, but because "temporarily able-bodied" persons single us out for different treatment"<sup>1</sup>. Access for people with disabilities has historically been born out of pity and benevolence and goodwill rather than "a prerequisite for equality and the foundation on which the church as a model of justice must rest"<sup>2</sup>.

There is a tendency for some in our society to think of those with severe mental illness, dementia, or intellectual disability not as people, human beings loved by God based on their preconceptions of what a person *is*.

Some basic theological concepts have an impact on how we see things as God sees them (bearing in mind it is naive to think we can see as God does). The first is the creation of human beings *Imago Dei* (in God's own image), according to God's likeness (Gen. 1:26-27) and we receive our lives as gifts.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 67

We are all called, to walk alongside others to love our neighbours as ourselves, and we need to integrate all who seek God into our faith community for our sake and theirs.

The important thing to remember is that the spiritual life of those who are disabled can be just as rich as anyone else's and if we bother to engage rather than ignore, we might be ministered to through this engagement. I know I have been ministered to many times in this situation.

Amy Kenny who wrote the book "My Body is not a Prayer Request" relates that "God doesn't remake bodies to fit the world but restores the world to welcome our diverse bodies."

We know from the bible that there are several key people who served God in important ways dealt with an impairment of some kind. In each case, God reaffirmed that He had chosen them, and promised to display His glory through what they could accomplish. These include Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul as some examples.

So – how can we incorporate those with disabilities

1. Become more accessible

All areas of the Church, Parish events, at least one accessible studies group etc Seating is another important accessibility issue. Making sure there are rows available for those who are physically disabled to sit next to their family.

Reserved parking spaces (ours needs a repaint), ramp entrances, a volunteer to open doors, and larger toilets are other ways to make churches more accessible. The secret is as much as possible the person with a disability should be able to navigate their own way without assistance unless they need it.

2. Create quiet spaces

Where does someone go if they need a quiet space during the service?

How would a family deal with an autistic child who needed somewhere quiet, or an adult needed somewhere quiet apart from the carpark. It is tricky in this church but ideally a separate room at the back would be the answer.

3. Connect people to ministry

People who attend church naturally want to get connected to others and have the chance to serve and make a positive impact. One issue to consider is how a church makes it possible for people with disabilities to get involved. Make sure that they, too, have ministry options available to them and that they are encouraged to participate.

4. Offer necessary resources

The reality is that people with disabilities can benefit from minor modifications that will make church an easier place for them; and the resources offered can be adjusted, as well.

Speak directly to church members with disabilities to learn their unique needs and preferences that will make it possible for them to keep attending church, get involved, and ultimately, deepen their relationship with Christ. Whichever adjustments the church is able to invest in and make will certainly be welcomed and valued by those with disabilities.

An important milestone in New Zealand's secular history which intersects with our theological understanding of disability occurred in 1 July 2022. That is the launch of Whaikaha – The Ministry of Disabled People.

I had a go at inviting Paula Tesoriero the CEO to talk to us today, but she is at the United Nations at the moment.

Enabling Good Lives or EGL are the principles that the Ministry has adopted with the intent of increasing choice and control for disabled people, and many of the organisations who had input are faith based.

### **Enabling Good Lives principles**

**Self determination** - Disabled people are in control of their lives.

**Mana enhancing** - The abilities and contributions of disabled people and their families are recognised and respected.

**Person centred** - Disabled people have supports that are tailored to their individual needs and goals.

**Ordinary life outcomes** - Disabled people are supported to live an everyday life in everyday places; and are regarded as citizens.

**Mainstream first** - Disabled people are supported to access mainstream services before specialist disability services.

**Easy to use** - Disabled people have supports that are simple to use and flexible.

**Relationship building** - Support build and strengthen relationships between disabled people, their whānau and community.

Ultimately, we will see increased legislation to ensure that those with disabilities of any type are able to take their place in Society and I think this is a good thing.

If we look at aged care for one, we as a culture (unlike others) tend to put those who need support into facilities, which can cater for their needs, however we need to be careful to continue to include them as part of our family and faith community.

Let's claim our ground, backed by the scriptures in how supportive we are of the principles of enabling good lives, and work always to include, not exclude, no matter what the disability.

Amen