

Sunday 7th July 2019
Luke 10.1-11, 16-20 (Galatians 6.1-16)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and redeemer.

In our gospel reading, Jesus says ‘whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you... say “even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you.”’ I used to work in disability support in a university: my colleagues would often say to me ‘we like the sound of your God, but we can’t get on with your church, it is so discriminatory’. Sadly, this is often true.

Many disabled people feel discriminated against by the church due to lack of access or unwelcoming and discriminatory attitudes. Many have heard things such as ‘if you had more faith, you would be cured’ or encountered the attitude that disabled people need things done for us rather than having gifts to give.

You may have heard of a recent event where a father and his autistic son went to evensong in King’s College chapel in Cambridge but were asked to leave as the son made a noise during the service.

Fortunately, in this case, they didn’t wipe the dust of the soles of their feet and turn away from the church, although that could seem justified. Instead, the boy’s father sent a letter to the Dean of Chapel which resulted in him apologising and inviting them in to work out how the chapel could do better in its welcome in future.

So how could we, as an inclusive church do better and ensure that we are welcoming, that people feel that they can belong here? I think there are several clues in this gospel passage.

There's a lot in this passage about hospitality: Jesus is sending out the seventy to be guests of the local people. What is the status of a guest? Guests come where they are invited, not by right; guests accept what is offered – we receive from those we've come to.

Jesus tells the disciples to 'stay in one place' in each town. Why does he do this? Wouldn't it be better to meet more people- spread the message further? I think that it is so that the disciples can build up a relationship with their hosts, so that they can listen and begin to build trust, to find out what gifts their hosts have which they can join in with.

So what does this mean for us, and specifically for our welcome of disabled people? We need to learn how to be good guests as well as hosts. What would happen if we slowed down and paid attention to the people around us: to accept what is offered to us, which might take a while to come to light; to build trust?

How can we expect people to be open to God if we're not open to them and their experience? If we don't make our building more accessible 'because no one who uses a wheelchair comes in', or we say that a person can't stay in worship because they shout out during the prayers, we are missing some of the diversity of gifts offered by the variety of people made in the image of God.

If we want to build of God's Kingdom of peace, we need to take part in a co-production with God and with other people. If its 'us' doing things for 'them', does that further God's kingdom where barriers are broken down, and all can belong in God's love? Does it build the peace – shalom which is not just a lack of war, but the growth of love, reconciliation, mercy and justice? I would argue it does not, we need to be working with a diversity of people to realise God's kingdom – we need to be open to the surprising shapes which the

image of God takes, and not to reject those who might bring something of God because the shape or medium of that message is different to we expected.

Jesus instructs the seventy to 'cure the sick', or in other translations to 'heal the sick'. This is a phrase which makes me uncomfortable. In common with many disabled people, I have had people come up to me and pray for my healing, without my consent. By healing, they usually mean the physical cure of my disability. When this doesn't happen, they see it as a result of lack of faith or of sin on my part. I acknowledge that I often sin and that mars my relationship with God and other people, but I don't see it as the reason why I'm not cured of my disability.

There's a distinction we need to draw between physical cure and healing. Healing is making someone or something more whole – becoming closer to the peace of Christ's kingdom, and I think the following phrase: 'the Kingdom of God has come near to you' is important here.

What happens when the Kingdom of God draws near? What is the Kingdom of God like? Jesus says he comes to bring life in all its fullness, and talks about justice, peace and love. So how does this relate to healing? If we take healing to be becoming as whole as we possibly can be in this world: enabling us to draw as close as possible to God and God's kingdom, I think it's probable that we all need healing to help us to draw as close to God as possible.

When Jesus heals people, he first asks them what they want – he listens, not assuming that he already knows. Then his healing restores people to their community: in his times, that often included a physical cure as there weren't the systems which enabled people to be fully involved in society whilst having an impairment. Now,

however, I, and many people with disabilities see disability as something of a gift: it's a part of how God made us, and has provided us with gifts and opportunities we would not have otherwise had. We must also remember that we follow a disabled Christ: when Jesus was resurrected, he retained the wounds of his crucifixion in his transformed body.

A few years ago, I went to the OuterSpace Eucharist for LGBT folks at the Greenbelt festival. We sang 'I the Lord of sea and sky'. There was an error in the service sheet which said 'I will *send* the poor and lame' instead of, 'I will *tend* the poor and lame', but I didn't notice at first as it seemed so natural to me. Ever since, I've thought it a strangely appropriate mistyping.

Jesus says to the seventy 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest'.

When I first read this reading, my initial thought was of those who go out into the fields with scythes and actually cut down the grain, but on further reflection it occurred to me that I was missing a large proportion of the harvest labourers, without whom the harvest would fail.

There is, in fact, a diversity of labourers needed to reap the harvest: in order to cut the grain, scythes are needed so there need to be blacksmiths and woodworkers who make and sharpen the tools. People are needed to cook food and bring drink to refresh the field labourers. There's the person with the weather lore who knows when its going to be right for harvesting; those who plan the harvesting so that its done efficiently and nothing is wasted; those who go behind and glean anything that is missed and so on. If we're going to work for the harvest of God's kingdom of love and peace,

where are the gaps in our team of labourers: who are we missing or excluding?

Are we assuming that disabled people can't be labourers in the harvest because they don't look like our picture of the 'harvest labourer': able bodied, fit, energetic, getting up and doing. Perhaps because of an impairment to speech, mobility, learning etc? Perhaps we need to be thinking more broadly about our picture of the harvest-there are a diversity of jobs which need doing and therefore a diversity of people needed. As St Paul says, 'the body of Christ has many members' and if the whole body were an ear, how would it smell, or a foot, how would it hear?

Perhaps we need to be listening and looking with God's eyes at the gifts given to each in different shapes and guises. For example, one of the best sermons I have ever heard, was delivered at Greenbelt by a fourteen year old who is a non verbal, wheelchair user, speaking through a voice synthesiser.

Until I moved from High Wycombe, last summer, I had the privilege of working as a chaplain in a nursing home. I learnt a huge amount from the residents, who often felt isolated and useless, about God. For example there a lady who was no longer able to speak by the time I met her and had lived most of her life in institutions due to severe and multiple disabilities but was always faithful to God and showed a huge capacity for joy and hospitality; every week when I went to ask who wanted to come to worship, she would enthusiastically put her hands together in a praying motion. There were the residents who cared deeply for each other every day: one helping the other with her deep confusion due to dementia or the resident who cheered all the staff up by caring about and encouraging us. When we ignore those with a disability, we ignore

part of the body of Christ – we become less whole so let us celebrate the gifts that God brings in the whole diversity of God's people.

I'd like to end with a poem I wrote about experiencing signed Deaf worship, at Greenbelt, it is called 'Eyes Wide Open' as Deaf people pray with their eyes open:

Eyes wide open
To the glory of the Lord
Shining in person, grass and
Unexpected grasshopper
Neatly folded on shoe

Eyes wide open
To signs
Of worship and praise
Expressing God's love through
The whole body.

Eyes wide open
To catch a glimpse
Of Joy as the inexpressible
Is touched upon
Without words. Beyond words.

Eyes wide open
To the Stranger
And the Stranger
Signing 'I love you'
One handed
The other hand to
Embrace the Other.

Eyes wide open
To see beneath the skin
Through the barriers
Erected by fear and hate
To the lovely core within

Eyes wide open
To the complete
And utter Joy
Of the Dance and signs
Of life.