



Series 1: Jesus, disability and discrimination

1 Jesus and the Blind Man - part one

By Craig Millward

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind since birth. Jesus' disciples asked, "Teacher, why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents sinned?" (John 9:1)

Every time we view a human body our minds recognise it as such because, for all the years of our conscious existence, we have viewed countless thousands of bodies and have laid down a mental pattern of what one normally looks like. It takes a millisecond to match the body we see with the embedded pattern stored in our brains and the whole process is completely subconscious. When we scan a crowd or meet someone for the first time, we subconsciously match our store of embedded images to search for features we recognise. This is the point at which people who look different is experienced by us as a shock to the system.

Human disability therefore creates a tension. We will all tend to stare at a bodily difference we've not seen before simply because something that is usually a subconscious act (viewing a body and recognising it as such) is being drawn to our conscious awareness and we are thus forced to deal with the unusual visual data that is before us.

As a physically disabled person I am very aware that, when I am walking in a public place, my very presence is disturbing to everyone I come into contact with, sometimes profoundly so. My arms were damaged by the thalidomide drug prior to my birth and they look different. So people who notice me are forced to make an instant decision about which they have not been forewarned. Many stare, others look away, some do a doubletake, children ask questions of their parents, and occasionally people ask me why I am different. The most humorous example was a teenage American boy who encountered me in a restaurant in San Francisco and asked, in all seriousness, "sir, are you an alien?".

The disciples noticed a man with glassy eyes, or maybe with no eyeballs at all, and, fascinatingly, the very first question that entered their minds was a theological one: "why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents sinned?"

In the culture of Jesus' day, the disabled, the diseased and the afflicted were more visible than they are within the societies in which many of us live. This is because they were forced onto the streets by economic necessity.

'In traditional Middle Eastern society beggars are a recognised part of the community and are understood to be offering 'services' to it. Every pious person is expected to give to the poor. But if the poor are not readily available to receive alms, how can this particular duty be fulfilled? The traditional beggar does not say "excuse me, mister, do you have a few coins for a crust of bread?" Instead, he sits in a public place and challenges the passer-by with "Give to God!" He is really saying: "My needs are beside the point. I am offering you a golden opportunity to fulfil your obligations to God. Furthermore, this is a public place and if you give to me here, you will gain a reputation as an honourable, compassionate, pious person. When a beggar receives money, he usually stands up and in a loud voice proclaims the giver to be the most noble person he has ever met and invokes God's grace and blessing on the giver, his family, his friends and associates, his going out and coming in, and many other good things. Such public praise is surely worth the small sum given to the beggar.' (Kenneth Bailey – *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173-4)

The problem created by such a tradition is that the beggar was forced to expose the part of himself that sets him apart from others in order to make a living. In doing so, he is in great danger of being defined in his own eyes by his limitations rather than his abilities. He also has no opportunity to receive genuine grace from others within such an arrangement since he becomes the net receiver of money in exchange for honour. Which of these, money or honour, is more important to our sense of dignity?

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think John begins this human encounter with a theological question?
- How do these cultural insights help you to view this familiar encounter differently?
- What happens within you when you encounter bodily difference?