



Talking about Disability and the Image of God: 1

By David McLachlan

This is one of a series of posts intended as a useful resource for pastors and churches. It is produced by the Disability Justice Hub of the Baptist Union. Our idea is that the whole church should be involved in a conversation about disability, inclusion, Christianity, and church. For that reason, at the end there are some discussion questions. You are welcome to use these just to think and pray through what is said here, or to help with a small group discussion on the topic.

This post explores a question that often comes up quite early in discussions about disability and Christian faith. We find in the Bible, as early as Genesis 1:27, that people are made in the image of God. That seems to be a crucial part of our worth as human beings, as well as part of our calling by God to be stewards of creation and, in some way, his representatives within it. But disability, whether physical or intellectual, challenges what we think it means to be made in God's image. We rightly want to claim that someone with profound intellectual disabilities, someone born without certain limbs or organs, along with everyone else, is made in God's image. So, what is that image and what can we really say about it?

This post and the next one (part 2) offer some ideas to help with this discussion. Each idea is only part of the picture, and because of our particular personal experiences, some people will find one idea more useful or less useful than others.

1 The disabled God(!)

Nancy Eiesland, a pioneer of disability theology, asked us to think how we would react to the possibility of God in a sip-puff wheelchair. That is the type of chair used by people who are paralysed and that is controlled by the person's breath, using a tube, or 'wand'. Eiesland was challenging our image of God himself and raising the possibility that we have simply conjured up an image of God that looks like the 'typical' or idealised person, albeit usually male. We often think of God as elderly (the Ancient of Days), but rarely do we think of him as disabled. Eiesland's discussion about the possibility of a 'disabled God' is an imaginative, disruptive idea to get us thinking, but it only takes us so far. After all, we cannot look into heaven and see whether the Ancient of Days does indeed have any such impairments.¹

More useful is to think about Jesus. After all, borrowing some words from Paul (Colossians 1:15), '*the Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation*'. As many a sermon has told us, if we want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is Immanuel, God with us. He lived a real life, with all the knocks and risks that entailed. We are not told that he had any impairments we would label as disabilities.

1 If you would like to read more on this idea, see Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

However, through his passion, and crucifixion, Jesus was treated very badly, and we can see that he was progressively disabled to the point of death. Therefore, if Jesus reveals God to us, and if the deepest revelation of God is on the cross, where we discover that God would even choose to die in our place, what do we find there? At that moment, the image of God we find is of an impaired human body that seems to speak powerfully of solidarity with disability. The image of God we find on the cross shows solidarity, not only with the fact of being disabled, but with a sense of shame, humiliation, and the hostile stare of those around him that so often, sadly, can accompany it.²

2 The Wounds of the Cross

Of course, the story hardly ends with the broken body of Jesus on the cross. There is more to filling in our idea of the image of God than that. Christ is risen! If we have faith in Jesus, then we are 'one in Christ' as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:28, or in Jesus' own words in John 14:20 "*I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*" So what sort of risen, ascended, reigning Christ are we 'in'?

Luke (24:39-40) and John (20:27) tell us clearly that after the resurrection, Jesus bears the wounds of crucifixion in his hands and feet and side. This is how the disciples know that it is him - both that it is the crucified Jesus that is meeting with them and that he is real, physical, present, and not a ghost or figment of their imagination. We should be honest here and recognise that Jesus is not making a point about disability and inclusion (at least from the way the gospels describe these meetings). But nonetheless, this is definitely the image of the risen, triumphant Son of God, and this image includes impairment. It seems reasonable to assume that when Jesus ascends to sit at the right hand of his Father in heaven (eg Colossians 3:1), he retains those wounds. They are now part of what it is to be Jesus. That raises two suggestions. The first is that the risen Jesus also shows solidarity with all humanity, inclusive of impairment. It was not just a transitory thing on the cross. We can say quite clearly that the image of God, in which humanity is made, is incomplete unless we recognise impairment within it.³ The second suggestion (to be explored in another post!) is the possibility of impairment continuing to exist in some form in heaven, in the new creation.

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel about the idea that we have imposed our own image of the 'ideal human' on God (and have excluded disability from that)?
- How do you feel about Nancy Eiesland's suggestion that we should imagine a disabled God?
- Does this only work for physical disabilities? What would we think about a suggestion of God with intellectual impairment?
- Does the crucifixion have the same problem - that it is too much focussed on physical impairment, and also does not say anything about congenital disabilities?
- The wounds mentioned are hands, feet, and sides. What do you think happened to the wounds from flogging, the crown of thorns, and the emotional trauma of crucifixion?
- Do you prefer one or other of these two ideas about the image of God? Why is that?

2 The Gospels are remarkably restrained in their description of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. Perhaps the description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, or the words of Psalm 22, which are fulfilled in Jesus, explore this image of God more fully.

3 This idea of the wounds of the cross is also explored in Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God*.