

A Theology of Inclusion

Bob Brooke

One of the greatest things about human beings is our diversity. We are all unique individuals, we are all different from each other and we want to affirm and celebrate that difference.

Right at the very beginning of what we call the Old Testament in Genesis Chapter 1, verse 27 we read: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female, he created them.” Whoever we are, we are all made in the image of God. We have the potential within us to reflect God’s glory and to reveal something of God to others. This applies to all people – it is part of what it means to be human. The idea that every person is made in the image of God says something very important about the high degree of worth that God attributes to each human being regardless of race, religion, gender or ability. Disabled people are made in the image of God. They are not a distortion of that image or a lesser image than non-disabled people but each one is an equal and complete image of God. As the late Nancy Eiesland, a theologian who lived with disability has written “Our bodies participate in the imago Dei not in spite of our impairments and disabilities but through them” (*The Disabled God* pg 101). Disabled people are not incomplete examples of so called “normal” humanity but are complete persons before God. Their impairments and disabilities are part of their human identity. All humanity is created in God’s image and that is an invitation for all of us to discover that image in each other, to treat other people as though they are made in the image of God rather than anything less and to expect other people to reveal something to us about the nature

of God. God has called each one of us into being and each one of us has a vocation.

In his Letter to the Galatians, St Paul writes “You are all children of God through faith.... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female....” and we might want to add no longer black or white, gay or straight, disabled or able bodied... “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (*Gal. 3:28*) Paul is saying all of us with all our differences belong to Christ and are part of his church. The Christian church is meant to be an inclusive church. But Paul isn’t just saying that all are welcome to be members of the Christian church, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, where he describes the church as the Body of Christ, he goes on to say that every member is important and has a part to play, has a ministry. He implies that difference, diversity is essential to the church – different members have different gifts and abilities and all are important. For the church to be the church, every person is needed, every person has a ministry.

John Swinton, a Scottish theologian tells the story of his friend Stephen. Stephen is a young man with Down’s Syndrome. He spent much of his life in a long stay hospital. Stephen loves to worship God. In the hospital he would go regularly to the services in the chapel. He has very little speech, just a few words. He knows the word “Jee-shus”, which is how he says it, and he would take great pleasure in shouting it out at various times in the church service. That was fine, in that worshipping community in the hospital there was a real sense of everybody belonging, everybody being accepted as themselves. For Stephen the hospital chapel and its worship provided a place where he could find acceptance, peace and a place to be with the friends of “Jee-shus”. The hospital, however, was due

to be closed and Stephen was to go and live in a small supported living project in the community. So one Sunday morning John Swinton took his friend Stephen to the morning worship at the local church near to where he would be living. Several times during the service Stephen shouted out “Jee-shus” as he tried to participate in the church service in a way that was natural for him. After this had happened three or four times a steward came and asked that they should either leave or alternatively John might like to take Stephen to the Sunday School where he would be less distracting for those who wanted to “worship in peace”.

John Swinton reflects on that experience of being asked to leave the local church with Stephen in the light of what St Paul says about the Body of Christ. Paul says “We are Christ’s body and each one of us a limb or organ of it”.(1 Cor. 12) He goes on to say that if one part of the body suffers every part suffers with it. John Swinton concludes “Stephen doesn’t simply have Down’s Syndrome, the Body of Christ has Down’s Syndrome. When Stephen is excluded, stigmatised and misunderstood, so also is the Body of Christ. When society fails to see the beauty of those it sees as different, it fails to recognise the beauty of Christ. When Stephen is excluded from worship in the name of “peace” we cease to be the Body of Christ in any kind of meaningful sense. Instead Jesus finds himself sitting with Stephen outside the walls of the church as we continue to praise, oblivious of his absence.” (*Building a Church for Strangers*” pg 25)