Disabilities are one of the realities of life. Although we do not hear much about people with obvious learning or intellectual disabilities in Scripture, Jesus did say that he came so that we “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10) and he didn’t exclude people with learning or intellectual disabilities. Perhaps there’s a simple reason for this. The majority of people at the time of Jesus were illiterate and so people with obvious learning or intellectual disabilities did not stand out.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that Scripture has little to say to people with intellectual disabilities. After all, just like all other people, people with intellectual disabilities have spiritual thirst like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4); and they become angry, jealous or resentful and are in need of love and forgiveness like both brothers in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32); and they are in need of affirmation, understanding and love like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Moreover, as a number of the healing miracles show, people ask Jesus for his help and mercy on behalf of their loved ones who could not speak out – Jairus for his daughter (Luke 8:40-42), the centurion for his servant (Luke 7:1-10), the father for his son with convulsions (Luke 9:37-43), the friends for the paralytic man (Luke 5:17-26), and Martha and Mary for Lazarus (John 11:1-44).

Many people struggle with the idea of intellectual and learning disabilities. For some parents, whose children are born with these disabilities, it is a terrible tragedy and something to be avoided at all costs. For others, their physical disabilities are merely additional aspects of their lives, aspects highlighted by discrimination and the thoughtlessness of a society that fails to provide adequate access to facilities or opportunities. For other people, disability is an intrinsic part of their identity, it makes them who they are, and they object to the often explicit suggestion that they should be cured so that they can be “normal” – as if there is a norm.

There is no one narrative that can make sense of disability and turning to Scripture for inspiration seems to add complications. The healing stories in the gospel can present real challenges to thinking about disability. When John the Baptist’s disciples ask Jesus if he is the expected Messiah, Jesus replies that the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk (Matthew 11:2-6). By implication, it seems that in the Kingdom of God there is no place for people with disabilities. Theological narratives appear to say that a life of disability is not compatible with having life to the full. However taking this approach and focussing solely on miraculous cures rather than on the Word himself would be to misunderstand the healing ministry of Jesus.

Healing miracles are primarily about Jesus and the reality of who he is, God and man. Miracles prove that time has been fulfilled; the Kingdom is near, that Jesus has the authority to do mighty deeds. Miracles are stories about discipleship and vocation because they are about having faith in Jesus and in what he can do. The gospel stories of healing are not stand-alone miracles; nor are the cures the central message. After all, Jesus cured many people, but he does not cure everyone – he cures only one man out of the many with disabilities at Bethesda (John 5:1-2), and Jesus does not heal anyone who does not want to be healed. Rather, the healing miracles are part of Jesus’s invitation to every person to “come and see” (John 1:39), to come and meet Jesus and stay with him. Naturally, “see” does not primarily concern physical abilities of sight. Instead, Jesus is calling us to a personal encounter with him in order to bring each one of us to perfection, not physical or mental perfection, but perfection into a deeper way of being the person that God wants us to be.

In one of the healing miracles (John 9), the disciples ask Jesus why this man before him was born blind, in much the same way as some people ask, “God, why me?” when they are faced with disability. Had the man sinned, or had his parents sinned? The disciples involve Jesus in a discussion current at the time about the priority of collective guilt over personal guilt. In the Old Testament, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel questioned a common Jewish proverb, “the parents have eaten unripe grapes; the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:1-4). But the disciples, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem simply to link disability to suffering and sin. Jesus turns the “why me” question on its head.

For Jesus, the question is not “Why is this person disabled?” Rather the question is “What is the purpose of my disability?” Jesus answers the question, saying “so that the works of God might be revealed in him” (John 9:3). Every person is called to personal conversion; every person’s life is for the glory of God. As St Paul explains, each person has a share in God’s work (1 Corinthians 3:9) and God works through the lives of every one of us no matter our intellectual capacities. Moreover, God chooses “those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise…weak to shame the strong” (1Corinthians 1:27). Scripture reminds us that holiness is found in everyday realities, in the way we love and care for others, and in how we glorify God by our lives.

People with intellectual disabilities often have the gift of living out the ordinary with great openness of heart. Certainly, just like everyone else, people with intellectual disabilities are in need of grace. All of us need God’s healing in our lives. Nevertheless, people with intellectual disabilities bring a crucial contribution to the world. They witness that being dependent on others, and being radically dependent on God, does not take away human dignity. Instead being entrusted to the care of others is part of being truly human and a sign of living life fully because it asks us “to live a life of love” (2 John 6).

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