



Talking about Disability and the Image of God: 2

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 continues a discussion about how we relate the idea of being made in the image of God to real humanity as we find it, which contains all sorts of variety, including what we call disability. Part 1 of the discussion looked at Jesus on the cross and the risen Jesus with the wounds of the cross as profound images of God showing solidarity with all humanity, inclusive of impairment. This part looks at three other ideas that are all part of building up a richer idea of the image of God.

3 The Image of God and 'Reason'

People have wrestled for centuries with what it means for humanity to be made in the image of God. A common approach has been to ask what it is that sets humans apart from the rest of creation, assuming that surely that is what makes us special in God's eyes, and lets us say we are made in his image. Much of that discussion has focussed on the fact that humans, 'unique' in the animal kingdom, have reason, the ability to think independently and rationally, solve problems and explore abstract thought. We also have self-awareness and 'agency', the ability to set goals and work towards reaching them. However, that train of thought rather hits the buffers when we consider people with intellectual impairment. Whatever criteria we set for measuring this reason and agency, there will be some people who do not meet those criteria. That leaves us scrambling for arguments that those people are equally made in God's image and of equal worth.

Perhaps a better starting place is to see that our value as humans made in God's image is not something special within us, but something outside us, something that begins with God. The Dutch theologian Hans Reinders has written extremely well about this.¹ There are two parts to this. The first is God's gift of life itself. God has chosen freely, out of love, to give us life. The second part is to do with the end purpose of life. God has given us, through Jesus, the gift of resurrection life and an eternal place in God's new creation. These are both God's acts of friendship towards us. It is God's friendship that gives us value and that defines what it means to be made in his image. It has nothing to do with individualism, reason or setting goals, ideas that are oppressive to those who are unable to express them.

1 See Hans S Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

4 Revealing What it is to be Human

This idea has to be handled with care. I am not currently disabled, but the testimony of many who have lived closely with family members, or those in their care, who are disabled is of profound importance. One thing often said is that people who are disabled, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are less guarded and more open than people who are not disabled. The point here is that there is a strong tendency amongst us humans to project an image of strength, independence, resilience, and success (to varying degrees). The suggestion is that through those with disabilities, God reveals to us what it truly means to be human. In truth, humans made in God's image are vulnerable and dependent (on others and on God) and often fragile. We have taken an illusion of strength and success, imposed it on God, and reflected it back on ourselves as what we 'ought' to be. Those with disabilities help us to be more honest about ourselves. The reason this has to be handled with care, of course, is that we would not want to conclude from it that it is therefore necessary that some people live with disabilities in order to fulfil this 'vocation' of revealing our self-deceptions to us. Rather, God works through the world as it is.²

5 Going Deeper: God's Attitude to Disability

The ideas in this post and Part 1 are all helpful pieces of the picture. Is there anything deeper that draws them together? One of the other posts ('Disability and God: a Place to Begin') asked about God's basic attitude to disability. It suggested that the cross, and what happened there, is really the testing place for all the things we believe about God. At the cross God reveals himself, his image, most vividly and there we discover that God is for us - he will even give himself over to death to save us.

At the cross God deals with the whole human predicament. He certainly deals with sin. But surely he deals with everything that cuts us off, or alienates us, from himself and from others. That includes aspects of disability, whether within ourselves, in others, or in society, that alienate us. Those are dealt with at the cross, and the good things about any life, including one lived with a disability, are preserved through the resurrection. If that is true, then at the cross God shows he is for all humanity, inclusive of variety and disability, right from the start. We are all 'within the camp'. Surely that is at the heart of what it means for all humanity to be made in God's image.

The benefit of revisiting the cross like this is that it means that each of the other ideas explored does not have to carry all the weight, or answer all the questions. Our main source of confidence in God's attitude to disability is the cross, the cornerstone of Christian faith. Each of the other ideas can shine a light on part of the picture, without having to be pushed too far. For example, the wounds on Jesus' risen body point to an image of God in solidarity with impairment, without having to answer all the questions about, say, what God also thinks about intellectual disability, or congenital impairments.³

Discussion Questions

- Have you come across the idea that being made in the image of God has to do with human reason and intellect? What questions had that raised for you?
- How do you feel about the idea that being made in God's image really starts with his acts of friendship towards us? Does that still leave you with other questions?
- The idea of disability revealing what it really is to be human is a sensitive one. What do you think about it?
- Do you find it helpful to think about the cross as showing God's attitude to all humanity, inclusive of disability?
- Does the discussion in these two posts still leave you with unanswered questions? What are they?

2 If you would like to read more on this idea, see: Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

3 If you would like to read more on this idea, see: David McLachlan, *Accessible Atonement: Disability Theology and the Cross of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021).