

23rd Sunday in ordinary time: Not just a dreamer

Community

Religion

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Today's readings: Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-5; Mark 7:31-37


Over the past two weeks the hashtag #wethe15 was drawing lots of interest on social media. WeThe15 coalition, which was launched to coincide with the Tokyo Paralympic Games that end today, seeks to change attitudes, end discrimination, and offer better opportunities of inclusion to people with disability, which make up 15 per cent of the world population.

Even watching a few minutes of the Paralympic Games are enough to lead one to acknowledge that this change is hard but not impossible. One of the rising stars c^f +h:~

Privacy

year's Paralympics is 17-year-old Anastasia Pagonis, who lost her sight three years ago. Yet this did not stop her from winning a gold medal in swimming. Bebe Vio, a wheelchair fencer from Italy, burst in cries of jubilation at the end of the match that won her the second gold medal – after the first one she had secured at the Rio 2016 Paralympics. Given the opportunity and the right environment, these people, and many others with disabilities, including those who do not make it to the Paralympics, can reach their full potential.

Of course, Isaiah did not have these champions in mind when he wrote that “the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing”. Writing to a disheartened people in exile, suffering the effects of their own bad choices, the prophet's words ring out in hopeful expectation of a saviour who will bring about a radical transformation for humanity.



In her book *The Disabled God*, the late Nancy Eiesland, herself a theologian who lived with a congenital disability, proposed that God is not some mysterious being that “fixes damaged goods”. Rather, God is among the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute. After all, so Eiesland argues, the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples not as a perfect body but disabled, and he sought to help the disciples overcome the taboo of disability by inviting them to touch his very wounds.

The transformation envisaged by Isaiah, therefore, ought not to be read in the reductionist terms of a saviour who whips out his wand to heal people with all sorts of ailments that they might be made acceptable conform to an ableist society.

Jesus's dramatic healing of the deaf and mute by putting his fingers in his ears, spitting and touching the man's tongue, sighing deeply, and shouting out “Ephphatha!”, (meaning “open up!”) is much more than just another miraculous healing, tout court.

If it were not for sign language and other means of communication, people with hearing or speech impediments would be completely excluded from the human community. Jesus's action, therefore, also symbolises the reintegration of the healed man into the network of relationships. It is in the community that our vulnerability is not seen as a burden but as a gift and an enrichment.

During the rite of baptism, the priest or deacon recalls Jesus's same actions when he traces the sign of the cross with his thumb on the newly-baptised person's ears and lips. These actions represent an opening of one's disposition to attend wholeheartedly to the Word of God, and subsequently to proclaim it, "if necessary using words," to quote Francis of Assisi.

Opening up to the Word and proclaiming it with one's actions can truly bring about a transformation of the world. It involves going outside our set ways of behaving and letting go of our obsession, fuelled by a neoliberal mindset, that medicine and technology offer the ultimate solution to all our human limitations and suffering.

To learn how to hope is to welcome the Wounded Healer who transforms the world and by restoring the broken human community one heart at a time.

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