

Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'. We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God. We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean. We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.

Sunday 14th February, 2021

Readings: (NRSV)

John 5 and John 9 (see text of the message for more detail)

Questions:

1. Ashley cited some ways the Bible speaks about those with disabilities which we may not be entirely comfortable. How do you view these passages?
2. What **similarities** do you see in the status of those with disabilities in first Century Israel and the modern day? (In what ways has this status **changed**?)
3. What should a person with a disability expect in becoming a part of the church?
4. Ashley suggested that during his ministry Jesus went on a journey of Insider to Outsider. Do you agree? Why?
5. What does it cost us to follow Jesus and become Outsiders ourselves?
6. Where am I on that journey? What must I do next?

Prayer & Poem:

- About our inclination to being Insiders.
- The challenge to be an Outsider.
- Praise to Jesus for his example to us.
- Reflection on the journey God calls us to.
- Prayer for ABC and what this means in our attitude and activity.

Malcolm Guite – Count Me In.

Mark 9:43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

How much we make of wellness, health, wholeness
 The ideal body, the unblemished form
 How deeply we despise and hide our weaknesses
 And worship all the world thinks strong and firm.

And how each facile photo-shopped appearance
 Haunts and accuses children as they grow
 Until the pine for their own disappearance
 And waste away and never tell their woe

But you have never fallen for this idol
 You had no form or beauty
 Hurt and shamed, a stumbling block
 A mockery a scandal

You lived with the rejected and the maimed
 Don't count me with the strong and tanned and thin
 Count me with the maimed
 But count me in.

Text of the Sermon: Insider to Outsider

Leaving the ninety nine – reaching out – reaching the outsider
 Which may feel like a risky thing, it feel like we are neglecting the many in favour of the one – if this was a percentage or a numbers game this looks completely the wrong thing to do... leave the ninety nine on the mountainside, or out in the wilderness.

But we know that this is not a foolish enterprise, because despite appearances, we know that mountainsides and wildernesses are actually places of provision and safety, because our heavenly Father is so attentive.

This week I want to talk about people who are on the margins, outsiders if you like and then invite you to come on a journey with Jesus.

The outsiders I want us to look at today are the sick and those with disabilities. And as much as we might think that modern society has made great strides to value and include such people, just look at this headline from this week's news.



Between March and November last year 30,000 of the 51,000 covid deaths in England were of people with a disability. If you have a learning disability you are six times more likely to die from covid than if you don't.

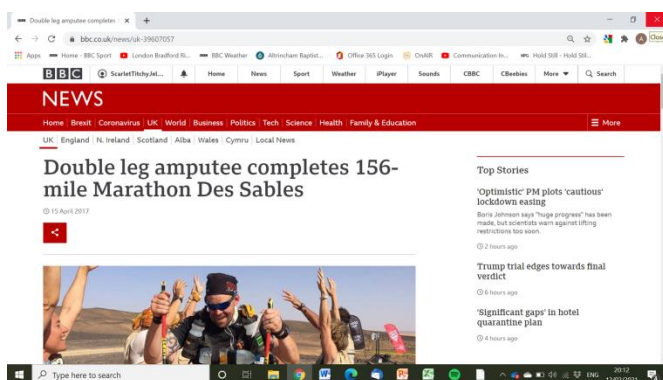
We might be forgiven for thinking that the Bible has a pretty unquestioned positive and inclusive attitude towards people who are sick or who have a disability, but it's actually not that straight forward.

In the OT we read in **Leviticus 21**

18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, 19 or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, 20 or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.

And in the NT, in the Gospels those with disabilities are sometimes used as

- **Props – for Jesus to make a certain point**
 - o But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.' Matthew 9:6
- **We read that sin and disability appear to be somehow connected,**
 - o As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' and that
- **The blind, deaf, lame etc. are used as metaphors for Jesus opening eyes and unblocking ears**
 - o 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'
- **And of course the healing of some people might indicate that they were somehow inferior – they need to be made whole.**
 - (Try telling that to Platoon Sergeant Duncan Slater, a double amputee due to his driving an army truck over a landmine in Afghanistan. Duncan Slater the first double amputee to ski to the South Pole, the first double amputee to complete the Marathon de Sables and a man who when asked,



- "If you could be taken back to that day in Afghanistan would you wish that you had never driven over that landmine?" Without a moment's hesitation said "No".

So perhaps things aren't quite so straight forward.

But what we cannot deny is that Jesus engaged with people who had disabilities and Jesus took notice of their plight in society and at the very least through healing them, Jesus gave these people a chance to work and thrive in the hand to mouth culture of first century Israel.

Here's a short clip from Channel 4's brilliant - The Last Leg who picked up on Alex Brooker becoming Britain's most influential disabled person.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np8BjGyonjA>

1min 54secs to the end

John 5

I have two stories for you this morning - both take place on a Saturday – the holy Sabbath day. The first takes place near the pool of Bethesda where many blind, lame and paralysed lay. At times the water in the pool would stir and it was believed that if you entered the water at that time you would be healed.

One man is there who has been sick for 38 years but, as it says in verse 7, he has nobody to carry him into the pool. But then...

8 Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. 10 So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, ‘It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’ 11 But he answered them, ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Take up your mat and walk.”’ 12 They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, “Take it up and walk”?’ 13 Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. 14 Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.’ 15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. 16 Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.

And we have a similar story in John 9. Jesus meets a man born blind, declares himself to be ‘The Light of the World’ and then this in vs 9.

6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7 saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8 The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ 9 Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ 10 But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ 11 He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’

Once again there is a reaction from the Pharisees. They can’t quite believe that the miracle has actually taken place, so they decide to question the man’s parents.

They go back to the healed blind man and question him again about what Jesus has done which leads to the ironic, if not down-right comical response: ‘Do you also want to become his disciples?’

I want to look at these two stories as two journeys; one, the journey which the sick or blind men go on and the other the journey which Jesus goes on.

And I have here the hi-tec medium of a flip chart to track these journeys.

In leaving the ninety nine and going out Jesus engaged with many people who were sick or had disabilities. In first century culture these people existed very much as outsiders.

- They had no position or status within the society of the day.
- They were vulnerable and had no influence
- And they had no power or resource to change their status.

They had to rely on the charity of others simply to survive.

A minister friend of mine called Sally, whose daughter has multiple disabilities, describes her daughter’s situation and others like her, as being outsiders.

In the story the sick man and the blind man are both outsiders, powerless to change their status, marginal to the society of the day. But what we see is that Jesus engages with them. Jesus looks them in the eye, he gives them dignity, he treats them not as inferior but with respect and of course he heals both of them – which at the very least opened up for them the possibility of work, income, contribution and a move away for the vulnerable and dependent life they had been living.

In short, Jesus turned both of these people from being Outsiders – to being Insiders.

There's a line in the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers which I simply haven't seen before. Matthew 21

14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.

But let's pause for a moment.

This moving people from outsider to insider – Jesus did it in lots of ways.

Last week we heard how Jesus associated with restored and honoured a sinful woman to the dismay of some around him. Next Sunday, we'll hear how he restores a sick woman who was excluded from the local synagogue.

But also think also about his engagement with

- tax collector Zacchaeus
- the Samaritan leper
- the woman caught in adultery

Jesus moves people who are outsiders to become insiders.

But I said there were two journeys here; and the second one is the journey Jesus goes on.

Jesus of course starts his Gospel journey as the insider par excellence.

Matthew starts his Gospel explaining that Jesus is of David's line.

He's the one who can hold his own or astound the teachers in the Temple even as a boy.

Jesus becomes a rabbi, he has disciples who follow him and we read, causes others to marvel at his teaching?

This is where Jesus starts out his public life; an insider.

But what did we read in our two stories?

John 5

15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. 16 Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.

John 9

16 Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided.

Because of Jesus' engagement with outsiders – whoever they were Jesus' journey is – well of course, you're there already! Jesus's journey is from insider – to outsider.

As Paul explains in **1 Corinthians 1:**

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,

In fact, there's a nice irony in the fact that these journeys form a cross.

Some weeks ago, one of our church members Stuart Christine lent me a book about Jesus engaging with the marginalised in John's Gospel and in it he highlighted these lines:

"A final reflection upon a Messiah who ministered to the marginalized is that this Messiah himself became marginalized. He had identified himself so much with the marginalized that he himself was thrown out of the synagogue. And then condemned by both religious and political authorities, he became, as the crucified, the symbol of all marginalized people".

Robert Karris Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel

It's one of the extraordinary things we see in Jesus – Jesus who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...

What is the culture of church life today – of our church life?

Insiders who protect and defend such a status.

Or people on a journey with Jesus to be outsiders welcoming outsiders?

I kind of like being an insider. It's simpler, it affords me certain privileges; it's less ... messy.

But I have come to realise that to really follow Jesus, what I must do is to follow him on the journey to become an outsider. (What that doesn't mean that I can justify every rebellious action, every anti-establishment practice that I may choose – it doesn't mean that I can get away with being non-conformist for non-conformist's sake!) But to follow Jesus, I do have to go on this journey – I think we all do.

And where are you on the journey? Insider? Outsider?

A journey on which every believer is invited to go, but one in which not every follower chooses to be obedient.

Are you like me inclined towards the privileges, ease, simplicity of being the insider – but look at the example of Jesus's journey and follow him, whatever the cost, identifying with the outsiders and even becoming an outsider yourself.