

# Healing to a Heresy

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*Vocations through the lens of disability & neurodivergence*

I'm very aware that this conference is about vocation, and especially about the vocation of disabled people, and I'm sure you've already seen, I am a disabled person. I mean a little bit about me, I have multiple exostosis, which is lumps of bone that grow out of all my joints. That had countless operations as I was growing up, it became cancer in my mid 20s, so I lived also with paralysis.

And I've also experienced hidden disabilities. I live with panic attacks. I'm married to a Scouser, so that would not be a surprise to you, and it's great cause she's not here - though, to be honest, if she was here, I wouldn't be any different. And also through my experience of all this, I've also lived with post-traumatic stress disorder as well.

So I come from a well of lived experience, and though I was blessed with a wonderful Director of Ordinands, I experienced and continue to experience differing levels of discrimination from within the family of the church, from clergy and from laity. And let me just share a couple of examples with you.

My first example was on the very day after I was deaconed at Southwark Cathedral on my first full day of curacy at Croydon Minster. Picture the scene: me confidently striding out, filled with the recent outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon me, confident in full clerical regalia, dog collar gleaming white against the early summer sun, jet black shirt (that doesn't last long), still revealing the marks of the creases from having only been freshly released from its plastic prison that very morning, my crisp new clean jet black suit on my crutches, to go and meet my new flock at Surrey Street Market, still

one of the oldest continuous markets in the country, to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ.

I had hardly made my entrance when one of the stallholders at the top of his voice shouted out, 'Oi, vicar, why don't you go and heal yourself?' This had the effect of the gathered throng turning towards the very person this quip was aimed at, namely me, and it was followed by jeers and laughter from the gathered throng. It was a rude awakening, which quickly evaporated all the confidence that I had mustered when I had initially stepped out of the Minster, and it had the effect of me turning right around as I slunk back from where I had come so that I could lick my metaphorical wounds.

My second example was on the day after my priesting a year later. I attended the local chapter meeting, the gathering of local clergy. It was here that one of my colleagues, a vicar of a local parish nearby, took it upon himself to share with me that, and I quote, 'I was happy to support you being ordained a deacon, but I have to tell you that I do not support you being ordained a priest because of what the Bible clearly states in Leviticus 21:21.'

Now I am not going to bore you by quoting the verse. Look it up if you need to. But it is fair to say that I was by then a year older and a year more experienced, and so rather than turn away and flee, I looked at him straight in the eye and told him where to go, using two words, each consisting of one syllable. We never discussed the subject again.

I share with you these two personal anecdotes to underline two of the major barriers to the full acceptance of the vocations of disabled people to leadership roles within the church. And that is our theology of healing, and with it, our inherited Greco-Roman anthropology.

Both have been and continue to be projected onto disabled people, and both need to be named. Now I have called this talk Healing to a Heresy, and that is because it is what I believe continues to be in the mind of the majority of churches who practise a healing ministry. They actually seek to heal to a heresy.

What I wish to do by the end of this talk is to name for you that heresy. The impact of this heresy runs so deep within Western Christianity that I will not be able to do it justice in just one talk, but hopefully there will be a book coming out later in the year where I get to elaborate more fully on the theme (blatant plug).

Whenever we are praying for healing, it should not surprise us that we project into that prayer a vision of what we hope the prayer will bring about. We may be praying into a situation that we are not comfortable about that we wish to see changed. A friend, a family member, a stranger is ill, or who has received a diagnosis which has the potential to shift a shared understanding of what the future held. Maybe it's a life-changing condition or a terminal illness. Maybe it is the recognition of the complexity that exists for so many living with a condition within a societal context and culture that does not necessarily marry with the needs and hopes of the person involved.

There is an implicit tension at play between the reality of what is and the hope of what may be, and our prayer becomes an emotional investment into that hope. What is rarely discussed is the projection that is implicitly and often unconsciously placed within the prayer of healing or any acknowledgement that the projection provides much of the emotional engine that goes on to power the articulation and expectation of that prayer.

Of course, a major projection may be an expression of the deep love that we may have for the individual, whether it be love towards a partner, a member of the family, or as a friend, and our prayer for healing is a natural reaction to the ongoing investment we have

placed in that person in question. We are distressed to see someone suffering, and we naturally wish for the cause of the suffering to go away.

Often the projection will involve a number of other sources, each interacting with each other and playing off one another. For example, the projection may be differing types of fear; fear around how we would or would not cope if we found ourselves faced with a similar condition living within a comparable situation.

This projection empowers a desperate need for success because of our often unprocessed desire to hear examples of where people have overcome the very situation we are witnessing. We may need stories of people surviving cancer, so that if we were to receive such a diagnosis, it would not be received as a total catastrophe, and so our prayer becomes one of yearning for the reality of such good news stories and a means of softening potential future blows that we may receive.

Another projection may be one of experience. We know someone else who had a similar diagnosis, and we wish for the recipient of our prayer not to experience the suffering that the other experienced. This projection also finds its roots in fear, but it is a very different type of projection and will channel different levels of experience and understanding.

It may be perfectly possible that many sets of projections will be at play in any given example. My experience is that there is minimal reflective work on the health of our prayers of healing, and have thus come to the opinion that our prayers of healing themselves are in need of healing.

Our failure to analyse, reflect upon, and critique our own projections, to own up to the many unconscious biases that are at play within this vital area of ministry, has in turn not only encouraged but embedded

deeply unhealthy forms of healing ministry that have done untold harm to many.

And it's not just limited to disability. An example could be conversion therapy, where people seek to pray away or suppress their sexuality, and in the process do themselves considerable harm to both their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Conversion therapy has often been practised to promote or underline a particular theology, in this case, that same-sex relationships are inherently unhealthy. Whether maintaining the investment placed in that theology trumps the flourishing of the individual or couple.

Though many who promote such theology would argue that the two go hand in hand, I would argue that the bias towards the theology takes precedence over and above the wellbeing and flourishing of the individual or couple, causing often considerable pastoral harm.

Often, the healing narratives of Jesus are used as an exemplar of this way of thinking. Jesus is faced with a person who is profoundly suffering, and he heals the person in question, invoking the forgiveness of sin. It is not a huge stretch of the imagination to understand sin as the cause of the illness, and thus surmising that there is something inherently wrong with the person in need of healing. Thus, someone who is same-sex attracted is understood as sinful, and that the sin is what the person needs healing of.

This particular understanding of scripture has also profoundly impacted on the lives of disabled people, where the particular impairment is understood as a product of sin, and that once the particular sin has been recognised and acknowledged, then the opportunity for healing can become a possibility.

If healing then is not seen to take place, then it is easy to continue to surmise that the particular sin has not been recognised or acknowledged, with full blame being placed on the individual, rather

than any reflection of whether it is the theology that may be deeply flawed or not.

Then there is the question of the unconscious bias of the writer who is sharing the healing narratives of Jesus that needs to be addressed. Is there a disconnect between their unconscious assumptions that the individual who is asking for healing needs to be fixed and Jesus's response that their sins have been forgiven?

So often in Jesus's healing narratives, we find Jesus alongside people who've been ostracised by their community due to their particular illness or impairment. Thus, we meet the blind man begging for his living, the leper living outside the community boundaries, the haemorrhaging woman deemed as unclean, the paralytic man unable to enter the house. All find themselves forced to live on the margins, whilst at the very same time desiring to be part of the very community that continues to keep them apart.

But being forced to live outside of the community with all its inherent sense of belonging and relationship, also bonds them together. Because by being understood as either being mentally or physically impaired or unclean, they are each barred, excluded from being allowed to access the temple in Jerusalem, and with it the opportunity to personally atone of their sins.

Could it be that Jesus's healing narratives are actually about fullness of relationship and welcoming us back into the heart of flourishing community? Rather than identifying their sin with their ailment, Jesus sees each person as fearfully and wonderfully made, made in the image and likeness of God and therefore a vital part of the body of Christ, the ultimate community built on loving, graceful, flourishing relationship, and if they cannot enter or are barred from physically accessing the temple in Jerusalem, then Jesus the living temple will bring the temple, himself, to them.

This he accomplishes through the extraordinary act of radical inclusion and boundary destroying every time he states 'your sins are forgiven'. Every right of confession is an act of healing. Jesus's healing narratives now become signs heralding Christ's radically inclusive welcome, where our full identity is found and honoured through our adoption, within the body of Christ.

We discover that we each have a vital and unique part of the body of Christ, and it is from this profoundly foundational understanding of our identity, that offers such graceful dignity to all who accept Jesus's invitation to be in relationship, that we can be liberated to become our fullest selves freed from fear and from ego, to serve all those we encounter day by day, in work, rest and play, secure and held in the knowledge that we are loved, honoured and valued.

This is the dignity and fullness of life that is promised at our baptism. This is the profound and transforming healing that Jesus offers each one of us each and every day. It is why we place confession at the front and centre of our faith; not to atone our sins, so that we will always be well, avoid illness or remove illness, impairment and suffering, but rather as our response to the immeasurable love, healing, and compassion that God has for each and every one of us as we seek to be in right relationship with God who is always in right relationship with us.

Our prayers for healing must surely seek to reflect this reality and not slip into prayers rooted in fear or prayers that are transactional in nature. As Jesus's healing narratives testify, we are not being healed back to an idealised physical or mental template, some Greco-Roman idealised other - an anthropology of idealised perfection that excludes all those who do not or cannot meet its often unattainable terms and conditions.

This, my friends, is the heresy, and for far too long the church has been healing to a heresy. We pray for miracles and for supernatural

intervention with the idealised other as our template. But when those prayers are not realised as we had hoped, we resort to explaining away the supposed failure in often deeply unhealthy ways, projecting onto the recipient of the prayer all the blame and guilt.

In doing so, we become the barrier to the flourishing of a significant minority of people, and we become the cause of profound distress and suffering. Jesus does not heal us to a heresy. Jesus heals us into flourishing and grace-filled relationship. We are healed through Christ's invitation to take our place within the body of Christ, a place that is me-shaped, that only I can fill, and a place that is you-shaped, that only you can fill. A place that holds our whole story, from conception to resurrection. A place that without me and without you, the body of Christ can never be complete.

This body, the body of Christ, is the Christian anthropology. It's God's anthropology. It is the body that is spiritually and physically articulated for us in and through the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.

So why do we continue to heal to a heresy? Western culture still carries a Greco-Roman idealised other anthropology rooted in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. We see this anthropology played out in our advertising, in body shaming, cosmetic surgery, various eating disorders, in the pressure to achieve the perfect bod.

Thus, when Christianity spread to the West, it was not even a stretch of the imagination to assimilate Jesus Christ into the place held by the idealised other of Greco-Roman thought and project unto Christ its very particular terms and conditions. And by doing so, we have in fact inherited a warped and deeply distorted anthropology, one that is fixed and fixated rather than one that is narrative and gracious.

Being fixed, the idealised body is absolutely passive. It excludes, reflecting an image that is profoundly male, athletic, healthy, successful, affluent, popular, heterosexual, with strong leadership credentials. Add to this the Jewish purity laws, and we have a heady mix, an anthropology that excludes all those who fail to match its exacting terms and conditions, and an anthropology that's deeply unsatisfying to those who managed to attain its status purely because they cannot hold back the ageing process, and therefore will only ever pass through for a season.

It is this very anthropology that drives the communities in the New Testament to deny people access to the temple. It is this anthropology that Jesus condemns every time he states in the healing narratives 'your sins are forgiven'. It is the heresy that we still heal towards today.

The theology of disability is a reality, a theology of identity and image, which ultimately guides each one of us, regardless of our physicality, mental health, gender, colour, sexuality or economic status, towards our true home. Founded in the resurrected body of Christ, a home where we all find our rest and find our true flourishing. One which reveals that in the Kingdom of God there is no disabled or enabled, just as there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

This is profoundly good news, for what we have sitting at the right hand of the father is a Messiah, the son of God, a disabled man in human terms - the open wounds of Christ are purposely not healed - but perfection in God's terms.

Isn't it about time that we, as the church, for the sake of all who are marginalised and for our own health and well-being, embraced God's terms by naming and throwing off our Greco-Roman idealised other anthropology and instead embrace our risen body anthropology?

Isn't it about time we actually embraced the transformative and transfiguring power of the resurrection? For that, my friends, really would be good news. Thank you.