

Sermon on Maundy Thursday, 14 April 2022

by Rev. Alan Stewart

An upper room charged with so many conflicting emotions; a celebration tinged with talk of betrayal and death. Simple acts like the sharing of bread and wine, of washing feet, take on new meaning.

And outside, the city is restless as plans are hatched and money exchanged.

Many over the years have tried to capture this gathering in an image or painting.

A few months ago, I was introduced to a lady called Celia Webster, a member of the Church of England Disability Group. For several years, Celia has had a vision for an image of the Last Supper where people of differing abilities are gathered at table with Jesus. Celia's daughter was born with learning difficulties and as a family they have experienced first hand an intense feeling of not belonging inside and outside of church; of feeling rejected, invisible, misunderstood, vulnerable.

In conversation with Celia and a friend, Jonathan Evens, that vision evolved into this image before you.



It's an image in charcoal which includes the central character of a visually impaired Jesus, surrounded by twelve people of differing ages, backgrounds and abilities.

I hope many of you have had the opportunity to look more closely at the drawing as you came in and there will be more opportunities to spend time with it in the next few weeks when it's framed. The hope is that it will be a nomadic piece, travelling from place to place, and that prints will be made to support charity and that resources will be created for use in schools.

Tonight, I'd like to use this image as a visual mediation. For those who can't quite see the image. Let me describe it.

From left to right;

- an empty chair
- a little girl with curly hair and a big smile
- a middle-aged man (a friend of Celia) in a wheelchair
- a male same-sex couple
- a young woman breastfeeding a baby, who is, incidentally, one of the twelve
- an elderly woman with her hand on Jesus' shoulder
- Jesus; a white stick resting against his body, his left hand outstretched, scars of self harm visible on his arms
- a young man with Down Syndrome resting on Jesus' shoulder
- a middle-aged man in a suit
- a young man experimenting with his identity
- a young woman smiling
- an older man, a rough sleeper perhaps

This Jesus challenges theological and Biblical imagery that equate blindness to sin or as something to be cured of. For many visually impaired people, their blindness is an essential part of their identity, finding stories such as our first reading difficult or painful. This is a Jesus who comes from a place of vulnerability, unaffected by the visual appearance of others.

Responding to the image, a visually impaired friend has written: '*An image of Jesus who is like me makes me feel accepted*' ... '*I wish my visual impairment would be cured. But I am glad that Jesus embraces it*'.

Writing about the piece, John Beauchamp, the London Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler, himself blind, says:

'The depiction of Jesus as representing bodily perfection and physical ability has denied a vast swathe of humankind a direct connection with the notion of incarnation. The incarnation of the divine in human form has been restricted to a complete, healthy, fully functioning body and mind, and disabled people, whose bodies are incomplete or dysfunctional, whose senses do not interpret the world with clarity or focus, whose minds function differently and awkwardly, have been left in a marginal space.

'Disconnected from the embodied Christ by their wounds and physical and mental impairments. Others have been excluded by the church; a church that has tried to own the embodied Christ and has attempted to limit who he is. The colour of your skin, the person you love, your background and origin. All these have been used to separate people from the embodied Christ and have pushed people into marginal spaces. But Jesus is the divine embodiment of all of humankind. Those who are blind and deaf. Those who bear the scars of their mental pain. Those whose bodies are incomplete or dysfunctional. Those who are black and brown and all the rich skin tones that grace the earth. Those who are LGBTQIA+ and seek to love with integrity and honesty. Those who are young and see the world through the innocent eyes of a child. Those who are old and see the world passing them by and feel unrecognised and unheard. Those whose genetic make-up destined them to possess a rare beauty and nature, but who are misunderstood and ostracised by a judgemental world. Those whose minds interpret the world in a way that others do not understand. Those who express themselves in ways that some find disturbing or frightening. Those whose feelings of shame and self-doubt haunt their lives and keep them in the shadows. This Jesus, this Christ, this Messiah, is all of these people and many more. The incarnation is not limited to bodily perfection, physical

ability, or mental capacity, but embraces all that humankind has labelled as 'other,' as outside of God's grace and love.

'In this Last Supper, the marginalised and excluded and devalued are invited to the table. Invited to be with Jesus. To sit and eat with him. To find themselves with him and recognise themselves in him. To find that their embodiment is not a barrier but in fact their passport into the kingdom where all of our human diversity is redeemed and celebrated in a riot of joy and celebration.'

What associations do we have with blindness?

How does this Jesus 'see' me?

Are we comfortable with a Jesus who self-harms?

Is his outstretched hand a welcome or is he asking for help?

I wonder why each 'disciple' has been chosen

I wonder if you're uncomfortable with any of these guests and, if so, why?

Who else should be at this meal?

I wonder where you would put yourself in this picture?

Is the empty chair for you?

What title would you give this?

Christ says, 'Come to me; the tired and the traumatised, the powerful and powerless, the helpful and the helpless... for here you will be welcomed, for no-one belongs here more than you.'

Readings

Luke 22:14-35

¹⁴ And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you I will not eat it^[a] until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. ¹⁸ For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.^[b] ²¹ But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. ²² For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" ²³ And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this.

John 9. 1-7

⁹ As he went 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?"

³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

John 13. 1-17

¹³ It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

² The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰ Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."