

Disability Awareness Sunday 2012 (Easter 5B)

St.Luke's Toowoomba 7.30 am & 10 am

The great American writer Carl Sandburg was once asked what the ugliest word in the English language is. He thought for a long, long time, and then replied: "The ugliest word in the English language is Exclusive." His comment comes to mind this week as we hear our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, and reflect on disability. For we human beings have such a tendency to exclude. And exclusion, no matter where it exists, is destructive and ugly. Whoever we are, perhaps we can recall a time when you were excluded from a group or club or activity, as an adult or child. Perhaps we can recall the assault our self-esteem took, how angry we were at those who excluded us, how harsh life seemed. For exclusion separates us from our best view of ourselves, from other people and even from God, the Lord and giver of life.

Perhaps some of us may also have heard of the American journalist and writer John Hockenberry. Born in 1956, he is a four-time Emmy Award winner and three-time Peabody Award winner, having worked in media since 1980 and reported from all over the world. John Hockenberry is also a prominent and inspiring figure in the disability movement. For he sustained a spinal cord injury in a car crash at the age of 19, which left him with paraplegia from the chest down. What he has to say to us this morning, do you think? Well, in his wonderful and challenging book called *Moving Violations*, John Hockenberry describes being in the car accident which left him paralysed from the mid-chest down and then, amusingly but poignantly, he describes how he adapted and overcame obstacles; physical, emotional, and spiritual. In one chapter he tells of how he tried to hail a cab in New York City and realised that getting a cab to stop for a person in a wheelchair is pretty near impossible. Indeed, as a result of being repeatedly

unable to get a cab, he decided to learn to use the subway. To do this, he had to work out a complicated arrangement to get himself up and down the many stairs. He went down the steps on his seat with his collapsible chair tied to rope around his legs. He knew the effort would be a test of his strength and savvy. His one worry was that he would be a nuisance and get in the way of commuters. But he needn't have worried. Crowds of commuters with briefcases and head phones strode by, stepping around him without breaking stride. On the ground he found himself dirtied by the soiled and blackened subway refuse and litter. There were horrible puddles of liquid. Yet what he found was that nobody really saw him anymore than they saw the refuse on the ground. He was excluded from the world, and he himself felt like refuse, irretrievable, present only as a creature dwelling on the rusty edge of a dark drain. In addition, he also tells of how only a few people spoke to him at all. Significantly, all were black: an old woman, a young hustler, and a businessman. For it seems as if it is often only those who know exclusion first hand don't exclude others quite so easily.

Hockenberry's experience is everywhere, isn't it? Whether we have physical or mental disabilities, others will often exclude us, and even go to great lengths simply to avoid us. What we see in the Bible, however, in Jesus Christ, is that God has nothing to do with some people's judgments as to who is acceptable and who is not. God accepts us, all of us, imperfect, unfinished, just as we are. God turns no one away; God cuts no one; God excludes no one. And the Bible reminds us that ALL of us are broken: for all of us are both in need of grace and sources of grace to one another. Let's just look at today's great story from the Acts of Apostles. For it shows us is that we, the followers of Christ, are to welcome, include and unite people; we are to change our attitudes and counter the evil forces of exclusivism.

Whom do you identify with in this story, I wonder? Are you like the Ethiopian eunuch, someone who is frequently excluded because of who or what you are: perhaps because your body, or your mind doesn't look or work quite the same as others? Or are you like Philip, someone who is called to share God's love with others who are very different to you, people who you don't always fit into your personal circle or world? For the story is about how the Ethiopian eunuch, a person with a serious disability, is at the centre of the love of God: the God who loves us just as we are. And the story is about how Philip, like all followers of Jesus, must open his life and share God's love with everyone.

When Philip was talking about Jesus, the Ethiopian listened very eagerly. For the story of Jesus which Philip shared was one of great 'good news' to him: good news about how God in Jesus Christ loves all of us and longs for us to love one another in the same way. For we need each other, with all the different gifts and abilities we have to share with one another. For we are all broken, or imperfect in one way or another: some of us in our bodies, some of us in our minds, and some of us, most seriously, in our hearts and souls. Apart from one another, we remain broken: even, and maybe especially, if we think we are **not** broken people. Together however, we are strong: all our fragments are then bound together by love, by cords (as the song has it) which can never be broken. Yes, this was good news for the Ethiopian: good news because, as an eunuch, a person with disabilities, he was excluded from full membership of mainstream religious and other communities. And, as if that were not enough, he was also a foreigner and had black skin. Three strikes against him being accepted!

How wonderful then for the Ethiopian eunuch to hear Philip's message: the good news that God doesn't care what abilities we think we have, but only about the openness of our hearts and lives

to His Love. Maybe Philip even told the Ethiopian about what the apostle Paul wrote: that, in Jesus Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female – and, we may add, crucially, there is no longer able and disabled - for all are one in Christ Jesus. "What then is to prevent me from being baptised from being a full-fledged member of the family of Christ?" the Ethiopian asked. And Philip replied: Nothing. There are no barriers of race or culture or human ability or anything else in Christ. So they came upon a pool of water and the Ethiopian shouted, "Look water." and he was baptised on the spot. He went under the water three times and died to all the isolation, rejection, and humiliation of his old life; and he came up with joy in the knowledge that God delights in him, welcomes him, and that the followers of Jesus do likewise. What a great story of acceptance and new life - and what a contrast to exclusivism!

So what difference might this story make to us, here in Toowoomba today? What do we learn? Two things. Firstly, we learn that God accepts and delights in all of us. For there are no outcasts in the Kingdom of God. We may have different abilities but we are all, equally, loved by God. So take up Luke 14!... For, secondly, we learn that as Christ's followers, we are sent out in the world to be *agents* of welcome and inclusion. Like Philip, we are sent by God to meet those on the sidelines. We are sent by God to talk to those who are isolated, to welcome, include, to encourage, to support, and to celebrate. We can invite them for a cup of tea or a meal. We can read a book like John Hockenberry's to heighten our awareness of disability. We can write notes or call on the phone or visit those who are excluded. The possibilities for this ministry are endless. And, crucially, we can listen to one another and learn from one another. For it is often those who are most excluded who can teach us best about God. God's mission is clear: to include, welcome, invite, build up: no barriers. Amen.