

# I walk with a limp

I am minimally handicapped – I walk with a slight limp. Does this make me a cripple?

The personal starting point in any discussion of dis-ability is accepting that being human is to have a non-ability to do something or many things. Some non-abilities are more obvious than others; some functional limitations are much more painful and frustrating to a person and to others around him. It's hard to be thankful for them.

But 'disable' is a verb not a noun – an aspect of how I express myself, not the essence of my identity.

The theological starting point is grace. God acts totally in grace – my abilities are not a right, things deserved or earned. All is privilege and gift.

Grace is to be recognised and given the credit for all I am and grace is to be lived by letting you be what you are. Healing always adds to life, but the issue is wholeness not healing. I am imperfect, incomplete, longing for integration, struggling for wholeness. And wholeness cannot happen without being connected to others and contributing.

So Jesus said first to the paralysed man lowered through the roof by his friends, 'My son your sins are forgiven'. Then the second gift of healing was given to underline the first. 'Get up!' (Mark 2:5ff). Jesus' ministry was marked by his disregard of human qualifications to belong to the mainstream of society or Kingdom of God. He had a message of 'good news for the poor, liberty for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed' (Luke 4:18ff).

Jesus exploded the link between disability and moral and spiritual unworthiness. The righteousness needed to stand in the presence of the holy God is by grace through faith. 'The blind, the lame, the disfigured and deformed' who were barred from the Levitical priesthood (Leviticus 21:18) are now in the front row of the priesthood of all believers.

If we want to live out this truth in our communities and classrooms we need

to listen to the experiences of the disabled. And to do this each of us has to first go inwards to our own version of dis-ablement. It sounds pathetic but the hardest thing about walking with a slight limp is dealing with the questions and the solutions offered by well meaning people – this is how you can achieve normality in walking! The medical model is not very helpful. It says that those with dis-abilities are sick and need to spend their whole life becoming well. They are given no responsibility except regaining their health and becoming normal. This leads to sympathy, charity, paternalism, institutionalising, segregation from others.

You are a cripple, you are dyslexic, you are ADD. We will protect you from abuse and exploitation so that you can focus on getting better. This is the charitable view. Segregation and removal from the mainstream is also the way to minimise upset to 'normal' people.

'I just want to be what I am and to be given a place in your life. Focus on who I am not how I am different from you.' This is what I hear people in wheelchairs say along with kids who find it hard to join sounds to letters on a page. 'What they want is what we each want – to be respected for who

we are – ordinary persons who live ordinary lives.

Nancy Eiesland, author of *The Disabled God*, writes 'The resurrected Christ is a disabled God... he experiences in his embodiment all our vulnerability and flaws. In emptying himself of divinity, Jesus enters the arena of human limitation, even helplessness. Jesus' own body is wounded and scarred, disfigured and distorted.'

So Jesus has a limp. Remember too, that Moses had a speech impediment and Paul a thorn in the flesh.

There is a wonderful story in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 9). Five year old Mephibosheth is crippled when a nurse drops him fleeing in panic after the death in battle of his grandfather King Saul. Years later David takes the throne and asks 'Is there anyone of Saul's family left to whom I can show loyalty and kindness as I promised God I would?' The answer from his servant Ziba is somewhat hesitant. 'There is one of Jonathan's sons – he is crippled'. In other words, he doesn't belong in the King's court with the beautiful and powerful people of the Kingdom. David calls him in and promises to restore his fortunes. 'I am no better than a dead dog sir' are the crippled Mephibosheth's first words

'Why should you be so good to me?' Grace is always a miracle. And the story ends 'Mephibosheth, who was crippled in both feet ... ate all his meals at the king's table.' I wonder what the King received from him!

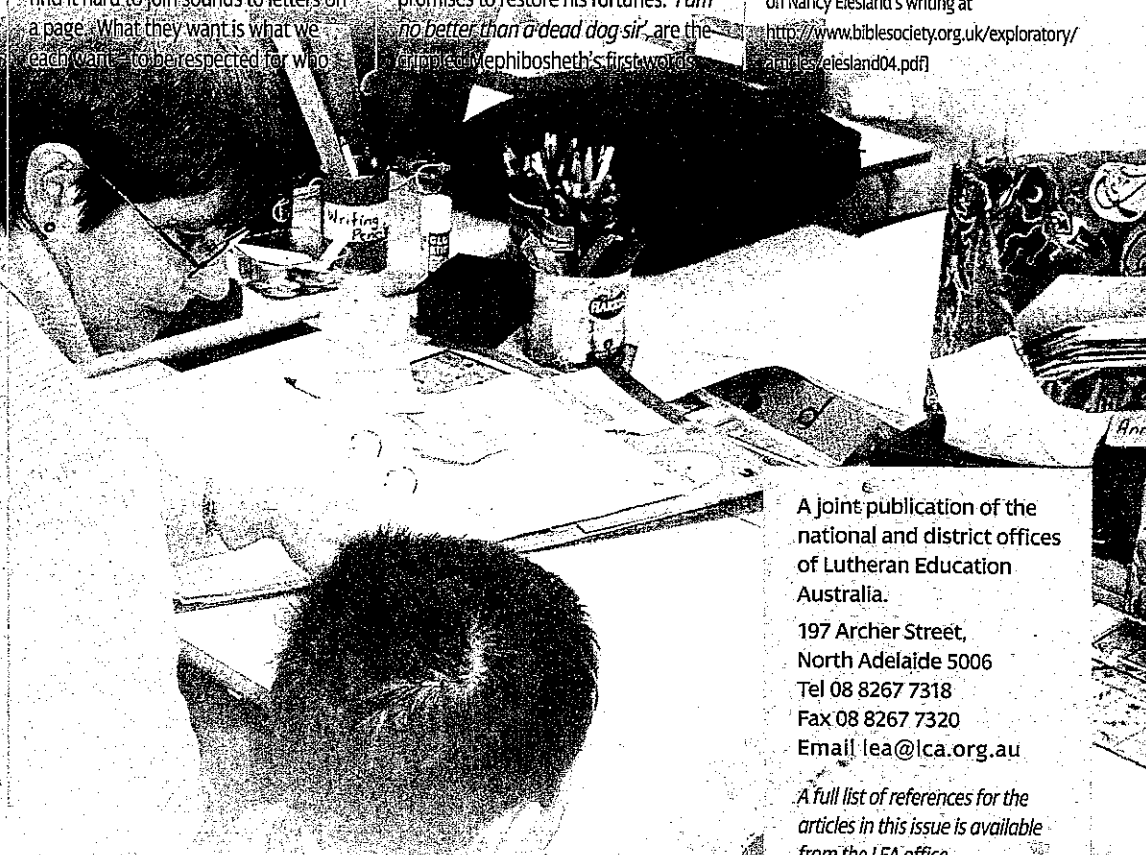
We are each differently abled and differently non-abled. The calling for each of the people of God is to discover what their abling and disabling equips them to be and express as children of God being recreated into the image of Christ.

And this is something we must and can only do together in the body of Christ. I cannot become whole in isolation from the complex interactions and interdependencies of the body. I cannot become whole when I am only together with those abled as I am.

I need to know and increasingly master the arts of love and giving, receiving and tolerance, generosity and trust, sacrifice and patience.

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Readers can access further information on Nancy Eiesland's writing at <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/exploratory/articles/eiesland04.pdf>



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