

# Seeing the disabled God

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 March 2023

A Reflection by Warren Talbot

Lent 4A

**Ephesians 5: 8-14; Psalm 23; Dramatised Reading: John 9: 1-41**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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## Preface

I knew there was something wrong because...the surgeon, Sanjeev, had arrived early.

The RPA's Director of Allied Health Services was on time, as usual. But instead of carrying a clutch of patient files, Vanessa was holding a...box of tissues.

After 101 nights at the RPA, and six surgeries under a general aesthetic, my left leg was to be amputated below the knee.

I was to become a disabled person. Or was I?

## Reflection

This morning I want to do three things.

First, a quick look at the Fourth Gospel. It's one that progressive Christians can easily overlook.

Second, I want to focus on our text, John chapter 9, of which we have just seen a superb dramatic rendition.

Third, and I hope arising from the text, thoughts on seeing the disabled god.

It's possible to overlook the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, because in the revised common lectionary we follow, there isn't a year allocated to John. Rather various texts from John are interspersed throughout the church's calendar.

The lectionary compilers give us infuriatingly short passages. For example, we have just seen a performance of the entire chapter 9, ie 41 verses. The lectionary gives us the first dozen or so, and we don't hear from John 9 again until well into the season of Easter. This may lead to a disjointed understanding of the text.

Whenever I reflect on the synoptic gospels, I remind myself that we are not reading a history or biography of Jesus. In the case of John that is even more so. John was the last of the four canonical gospels to be written, late in the first century CE. Perhaps 30 years after Mark.

As with the other three canonical gospels, we are hearing a distinct theological interpretation of Jesus. And for John, it's all about vision and light, seeing God and the signs which point to the light. In John chapter one, the Word that was in the beginning is described as the light of the world, which has not been overcome by darkness.

This month we have heard John's account of two significant conversations which Jesus has. The first conversation was with Nicodemus, and the second with the Samaritan woman, of which we had a dramatic rendition last week.

Although the story we saw this morning is most likely fiction, the reality of individuals and even religious communities living in darkness of one sort or the other, is not fictive. It is clear that John is making use of the story to reinforce key points about Jesus as the light of the world.

Blindness is in fact a frequent metaphor in the teaching of Jesus, whether in the synoptics or John. There are sighted people who are spiritually blind, and blind people who see. As Marcus Borg suggests, the stories about blind people enable the two Gospel writers who use them, Mark and John, to frame their entire Gospel accounts. It may be that John had access to Mark, but there is no agreement amongst scholars on that.

To be given one's sight, to see, means following the way of Jesus. In today's text John's Jesus is able to declare that "*I am the light of the world*" (verse five). The various "*I am*" statements attributed to Jesus are a feature of John.

That Jesus brings enlightenment is a key theme in John and the early Christ communities. Interestingly, it is also a key theme in eastern religions, such as Buddhism, where the Buddha is seen as the enlightened one.

The imagery of seeing the light, or illumination, is frequently associated with mystical or conversion experiences. Think of Saul on the road to Damascus.

Some of the words from today's story are very familiar. At the end of the service today we will sing from a very well-known hymn, which has the words "*I once was blind, but now I see*".

Although I have suggested that today's story is essentially fiction, I don't think that should lead us to avoid the physicality which is inherent to the narrative. That dimension was presented very well in the dramatic rendition we saw. I am particularly struck by the earthiness of Jesus' actions.

Not for the first time, a Gospel writer has Jesus use his own spittle as a part of a healing story. In this case Jesus spits into the dirt to form a type of mud paste. Must have been quite a lot of spit really – and on the Sabbath as well!

In the text itself, the blind person functions as a rhetorical foil for the blindness of the Pharisees. The obvious but still engaging irony is that the blind person sees what the religious authorities and leaders do not.

Jesus and the blind person were both sinners in the eyes of the religious authorities. The blind person because it is presumed that either they or their parents must have sinned for them to be blind.

And in a theme common in the Gospels, Jesus is a sinner because Jesus is daring to heal people on the Sabbath, the day of rest.

It is the irony in the text - of seeing and not seeing, or being disabled or abled - which has been of most interest to people working in the emerging field of disability theology.

I sometimes have mixed views about what might be called adjectival theologies. That is, feminist, liberation, queer or black theology, or in today's case disability theology. The reason for my concern is fairly basic, namely that all theology should involve reflection on social and political context and lived experience. It should not be something which has to be added on to the work of the theologian or the philosopher.

That said, there are some incredible insights which emerge from the historical and political particularity of adjectival theologies. In the case of disability theology, the outstanding landmark text is from Nancy Eiesland who wrote "*The Disabled God*" just on 30 years ago. And almost no discussion about disability and theology takes place with reference to the work of Nancy Eiesland. In the same way many works in feminist theology and philosophy make reference to Mary Daly's ground breaking "*Beyond God the Father*".

Eiesland's book is not much more than 100 pages, but it's worth reading and re-reading. The final chapter, called "*sacramental bodies*" is on the Sacrament of Eucharist or Holy Communion, which Eiesland refer to as the "*dangerous memory*" of the crucified One.

If we dare to remember the crucified God each week or each month, might we not also dare to have the dangerous memory of the disabled god? The One who lacks the power and abilities of the religious authorities but is clearly seen in the Way of Jesus.

For Eiesland the Cross is the symbol of the disabled god. Picasso's 1930 painting of the crucifixion, on the cover of Eiesland's book and our liturgy booklet today - you might like to have another look - captures the pain and suffering many disabled people report. Yet, according to Nancy Eiesland, the Cross is also a symbol of hope and liberation seen in the everyday lives and loves of people living with a disability.

My sisters' grandson, that is to say my grand-nephew, was born congenitally blind and is living with spastic paraplegia. There are almost no activities of daily living which Saxon can do for himself. He is cared for by his mother and three older sisters.

I thought of Saxon this week when the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Dutton, stated that we would need to cut the NDIS in order to pay for our second-hand nuclear submarines.

I was visiting my sister and her family in Townsville in 2019, pre-COVID. We went to a local swimming pool one afternoon. For me, swimming is quite simple. I sit down on the ground, remove the prosthetic leg, put a protective covering on the stump, and crawl into the water like an overweight baby.

Saxon has never physically seen water, but he loves the swimming pool and the ocean. At the pool two of his sisters tell him what they are going to do. He is very excited. He makes noises, as he can't yet pronounce words. They then lift the eleven year old blind boy from the paraplegic chair which he lives in, they swing him in the air at least twice, and toss him into the pool! He emerges from the water, grinning and laughing from ear to ear. A beacon of great joy.

Don't ask me about the disabled god.

I have seen the disabled god. Amen.

## **References**

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