



Being born with a serious disability, or gaining one through accident or injury is one of the most difficult situations to deal with in life. Those who struggle to overcome such disabilities are very brave indeed, and they deserve respect and admiration. But more than that, they deserve to live in a society which doesn't make their disability worse by a failure to accommodate their needs. That was the reason why the PCC advanced plans to make our church buildings accessible, and launched the Access Project, which is so near to completion now.

Disability is hard enough to cope with when it comes by birth or by accident. How much worse that it is in some cultures, encountered by way of punishment. It is really shocking to read of people having their hand severed, a deliberate act of mutilation as a punishment. This is a way of making their life more difficult.

We read about this in conflicts in, for example, Liberia and the Congo where people had their arms cut off as punishments. This means that they can't work, or feed themselves ever again. They will find life harder following such a punishment, than ever before.

It is sad to say that in Islam, the Koran, apparently, prescribes "eye for eye" punishments, and we read this week about a court in Saudi Arabia which was considering asking a hospital deliberately to paralyse a man, to sever his spinal cord, as a punishment for the actions which he took which led his victim being paralysed.

And then we come to the story in today's Gospel. Jesus heals a crippled woman. For eighteen years she has been bent double, unable to stand upright and now, because of this meeting with Jesus, she is freed from her disability and able to get on with a normal life again.

She is delighted, as you may imagine, but the authorities are very unhappy.

Why?

Because it was the Sabbath Day. The Leader of the Synagogue regards healing as work and this is forbidden on the Sabbath Day. Jesus is astonished and reacts with strong language. He describes his detractors as "hypocrites!" - and goes on to demonstrate why by reminding them that they do things like feeding their animals on the Sabbath day. What's that if it isn't work?

Healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath is one of the activities which leads to the religious authorities losing patience with Jesus. But the problem is theirs.

The religious leaders have lost sight of the fact that religion is not an end in itself, but a way of enhancing human lives and leading people to fulfillment in response to the love of God. Such a simple idea?

Like the Priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, the leaders can only see their religion as, in effect, a individual plan for salvation. They obey the law, in every detail, and those who don't are law-breakers, and so cast out. The thrust of the ministry of Jesus is to bring good news to those who have been thrown out and made to feel like sinners because they are not obsessed with keeping the Law and being personally pure.

Jesus was right. Individualism is not what Judaism or Christianity is all about. They are about being human, having abundant life and sharing it with others, especially those who feel pushed into the margins and forgotten, or not considered.

Our faith teaches us to embrace, not to reject our humanity.