



Series 1: Jesus, disability and discrimination

2 Jesus and the Blind Man - part two

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Returning to the encounter with the blind man, the question posed by the disciples reveals something about the way they were re-processing the world as a result of their journey with Jesus. Within their theological system there were two options: the sin that caused the disability was either located with the parents or the man himself. They were about to discover that there was at least one more option they'd not thought of but, before we get to that, I want to touch on the issue of the way we do our theology when faced with difficult questions.

Disability is only a theological question for those of us who believe in both a good and sovereign God. Yet, in my experience, most people tend to avoid this sort of hard question, maybe out of fear that the map they use to make sense of the world might not be up to the job. The disciples ask the very question I wanted answers to throughout the whole of my early years as a Christian. Yet, for me, this was a high stakes question for at least four reasons:

- It risks upsetting the relative harmony of the present moment
- It risks putting the other person in an embarrassing situation
- It risks creating a scenario where 'any answer' will be dragged in as a stop-gap
- It risks unmasking the possibility that no satisfying answer exists

I have encountered numerous painful comments and actions from Christians who, on meeting me, clearly sensed the need to restore balance to their view of God and his relationship with the world as quickly as possible. These range from a worshipper who was overheard asking exactly the same 'sin' question the disciples asked as I led a service in her church, to Christians who jump straight to the insistence that I should be 'healed' (ie made to look like them) even before they have got to know me.

The lesson I learned from numerous encounters like these in my younger years is that I was an embarrassment to some and that it was therefore unsafe to explore questions that would make people feel even more uneasy. Later in the gospel story we discover that the religious leaders had already bolstered their theology against any breach, a fact that is revealed by their response to the recipient of Jesus' grace: "You Mamzer" they shout, a term used for person entirely born in sin and therefore beyond redemption. Neat and tidy theology is not only invariably wrong. It also has little place for any degree of compassion.

Jesus, as we might expect, saw things differently. Once again, he refuses to begin with the question of sin. He sees the individual through the lens of the Kingdom of God and seems also to be aware of the opportunity to recalibrate the grace equation:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:3-5)

Such a question may be perceived as a threat by a religious teacher who saw it as his task to leave no loose ends within his theology, but the disciples seemed to have known they could be honest with their Rabbi and were confident Jesus wouldn't fudge the issue. Jesus' response thereby shifted the question from the realm of academic theology and created a learning opportunity for the blind man and the crowd. Theoretical theology thereby became practical action in the same blink of time others would have used either to stare, turn away, do the double-take or ask the kind of question posed by the disciples.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways do you see disability as a theological question?
- How do you feel when people raise questions about disability and Christian faith?
- What prevents the religious leaders acting like Jesus?