

THE HEALING OF THE BLIND AND LAME (MATTHEW 21:14) AND THE CALL TO PROMOTE THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

The text of Matthew 21:14 is part of a larger unit (Matt 21:12-17) which deals with the Temple cleansing. Jesus has dealt with those he wished to rebuke and now turns to the blind and the lame, who apparently either weren't driven out of the temple court or now enter it to approach Jesus. According to 1 Samuel 5:8, "the Blind and the lame shall not come into the house (of the lord)." The blind, lame and the physically affected were not supposed to be in the Temple at all; there is an assumed link between sin and disease, and their presence is considered incompatible with holiness (cf. Lev 21:16-24). This article attempts to look at Jesus' healing of the blind and lame in Matthew 21:14 as the fulfilment of the OT prophecies about the return of the glory of God and the challenges it poses for contemporary Christians. It argues that if properly understood, the rights of persons with disabilities would be respected, promoted and preserved.

Keywords: Disability, Rights, Healing, Blind, Lame, Disadvantaged Persons, Matthew

Introduction

The Bible does not contain a fully elaborated, codified doctrine of human rights, it does however, address several issues relating to the rights of people. The idea of human rights is the claim that every human being has the same right to be treated as persons, irrespective of their religion, sex, political persuasion or social or economic status. The basis for the human equality is the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God (Vorster, 2012: 3).

Most people living with disabilities have been subjected to prejudices, discrimination and segregation (Hahn, 1997: 174). According to scripture, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute” (cf. Prov 31:8). The implication is that the Church has a responsibility to serve as the prophetic voice for the marginalised in society. Persons with disabilities form part of the marginalised in society, and it is, therefore, imperative that their rights be respected, promoted and preserved.

This restoration of human dignity can be seen in Jesus’ action in the larger context of Matthew 21:12-15. It is here that the most marginalised of the periphery represented in the gospel narrative come to Jesus to be healed. However, the Pharisees and temple officials are not able to recognise the need to heal broken humanity represented in the blind and lame rather, they are only able to see the material loss.

Subsequently, they admonish Jesus for failing to value what they value, while worshipping in a temple that seems to be lacking God. Rather than being able to hear the presence of God within the worship of children, the cries of the least are lost on the human stewards of God’s creation. This article, therefore, seeks to explore the text of Matthew 21:12-15 and its implication on the rights of persons with disabilities.

An Understanding of Disability

The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines disability as the state of lacking some physical ability or any restriction resulting from impairment that prevents someone from performing an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. It is a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (Procter, 1995:123).

Texts of Matthew 21:14

Transliteration of the Greek Text

kai prosēlthon autō tūphloi kai chōloi entō heirō, kai etherapeusen autous

¹⁴The blind and the lame came to him in the temple (en tō hierō), and he cured them.

The Centrality of the Temple in Matthew 21:14

The word *hieron* ("temple") refers to different quarters in the temple. In order for us to know what the "temple" means and where the exact location of the blind and lame was when they were healed (Kohlenberger, 1997:236), we need to enlarge our study of the uses of *hieron* in the NT.

(1) It is used when the reference is to the whole complex. The gentiles were allowed to be in the outer court (the court of the gentiles) and not beyond (Barrett, 1987: 53).

(2) It is used for the court of women, where Anna prayed (Luke 2:37), and Jesus observed the poor widow putting her offerings (Mark 12:41ff). Evidence from the New Testament shows that lame may come up to this point. In Acts 3:2, the lame was laid daily at the gate called Beautiful, the "high inner gate," which "leads from the court of women into inner court" (Schrenk, 1965:236).

(3) It is used for the inner court, with the altar and the temple proper. This was for the men (court of Israelites) and for the priests. Men came to worship and brought their offerings and sacrifices to the altar (Matt 5:23, 24; Acts 21:26).

(4) It is used for the temple proper (*naos*), where only priests could enter (Luke 1:9) (Schrenk, 230-247).

From the foregoing, it is likely that the business of buying and selling was going on in the court of gentiles. The blind and lame came from the court of gentiles (outer court) or likely the court of women, traversed the Beautiful Gate, and got into the "temple," i.e. the inner court (Court of Israelites) to be healed by Jesus. In cleansing the temple, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:7, as He reacted upon seeing the business in the temple: it is a "house of prayer," not a "den of thieves." However, Isaiah 56:7 goes on to state that the temple is a "house of prayer for all nations." Even though Jesus did not explicitly quote that phrase, His immediate

following action of approving the entrance and healing the blind and the lame in the temple (21:14) implies it. The temple is the house of prayer for all. There will be no discrimination to enter it to worship God.

Blind and Lame Prohibited from Entering the House

At a cursory reading, David's decree that "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house" in 2 Samuel 5:8 seems to be unrelated to the prohibition of the blind and lame from serving in the priesthood in Leviticus 21. As a matter of fact, the text says that "blind and lame" were "hated by David's soul" (2 Sam 5:8), and that hatred seemed to be the reason for their prohibition from entering the house, and not any other reason that may have been deduced from the Levitical instruction.

According to Josephus, the Jebusites were so confident of the strength of their wall that they placed blind and lame upon the wall to defend the city, obviously in contempt of David (Josephus, 7.61). Unfortunately, Josephus makes no mention or comment of "the blind and lame shall not come into the house." It is clear that for David, it is the Jebusites who were the blind and lame. He identified them as such, and declared them to be rooted out. As Keil and Delitzsch note, "'blind and lame' has the general signification of 'repulsive persons,' with whom one does not wish to have anything to do" (Keil and Delitzsch, 1987: 365). David, under provocation, decreed to exclude the blind and lame from the house. It "eventually gave rise to an epigram: 'the blind and lame' will not enter the palace [house]" (Youngblood, 1992:856). However, it could be that, in David's mind, it was the Jebusites who were blind and lame who were barred from associating with him. In all likelihood, David did not exclude blind and lame from his house. His eventual welcome to the lame Mephibosheth into his royal palace (2 Sam 9:13) provides evidence for this.

The question remains unanswered: why the exclusion of the blind and lame from the temple? Bruce C. Birch affirms, "we do not know of such regulation although disabled persons could not become priests (Lev 21:18)" (Birch, 1994: 1237). Joel O. Lewis disagrees, stating, "David's challenge to his men later became the explanation for refusing to allow the lame and blind in the temple (v.8 and Lev

21:18)” (Lewish, 1980: 85). Hentrich, in his turn, argues that the reason for the prohibition of blind and lame from the temple was not their opposition to David during the fall of Jerusalem (these were Jebusites), but the blind and lame’s perceived impurity, thus, following Leviticus 21:18 (Hentrich, 2019:19).

The Hebrew *bayit* is used in the OT for a “dwelling palace” (cf. 2 Chron 9:11, or god’s house/temple, 2 Kings 11:10, 11, 13), house/place to stay (Exod 10:6), or household/family (Gen 7:1). In the LXX, the word as used in 2 Samuel 5:8 is translated into *oikon tou kuriou*, “house of the Lord.” This is significant in that the LXX translators understood it as the temple, thus, prohibiting the blind and lame from entering the temple. To stress it further, LXX translation and interpretation may reflect the way Jewish people thought about the blind and lame.

Even though the text says nothing about their impurity, this phrase indicates that David himself would have ordered their expulsion from the temple on personal grounds that are founded in their presumed opposition to him. More likely though, disabled people seemed to have played a more active role in the Jebusite cult centre prior to the capture by David, but are considered impure by Israelite standards. For this reason, they are subsequently excluded from the temple once it was built shortly after David’s reign (ibid).

However, the translation of *bayit* into “house of the Lord” as the etiology of the epigram “the blind and lame shall not enter the house” in 2 Samuel 5:8, seems to indicate that around the time of the LXX translation in the third century, the exclusion of the blind and lame from the temple was in effect, or at least expected (Godman, 2014). The motif of their exclusion seemed to be their perceived impurity which was associated with their disability (ibid). Jewish writings around the NT time support that idea.

Theological Implications of the Entrance and Healing of the Blind and the Lame

The scene in Matthew 21:14 states that the blind and lame, who were previously excluded, came into the temple, and Jesus healed them. For the religious leaders, the temple has been defiled by the entrance of those who did not have the right

to enter it. Their cups overflowed. They were full of indignation (Matt 21:15c). The condemnation of Jesus was just steps away. But there is more to Jesus' action to approve the entrance of the blind and lame into an area where they were forbidden, and His healing of them, irrespective of the indignation of the religious leaders.

These implications are worth noting:

Messianic Age

Matthew draws the attention of his readers to see that the procession from the Mount of Olives and the riding on a donkey, the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple, and the healing of blind and lame were all signs of messianic age, the dawning of God's kingdom, as fulfillment of OT prophecies (Matt 21:4). Even if Matthew mentions Jesus on Mount of Olives only during the final week of His life, the fact that he mentions three times Jesus' activities there is striking (Matt 21:3; 24:3; 26:30). His start of the procession from the Mount of Olives must be linked with His ascension from and second return on the same mountain (Acts 1:11) as Zechariah has prophesied in the OT (Zech 14:4). His riding on a donkey was a matter of deliberate choice and of careful planning to show the kingly fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 (France, 2007:774). Besides associating his kingly posture with riding a donkey, people proclaimed Him as the Son of David, a title with an explicit messianic connotation (cf. 2 Samuel 16:2).

The Psalmist's utterance, "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118:26) is now fulfilled. But the dawning of God's kingdom is also seen in the carrying out of His mission as He himself uttered it in Luke 4:18-19 (cf. Isa 61:1,2), of which healing the blind and lame is an integral part. Now that the blind and lame were healed in the temple, their entering it [the temple] for healing has been described as a powerful sign that God's kingdom was indeed at hand (Nienhuis, 2015).

Return of God's Glory in the Temple

The Mount of Olives' motif in Matthew is not only linked with the prophecies of Zechariah as we have seen. It is likely that Matthew has also in mind Ezekiel's prophecies in relation to the glory of God, its departure from the temple to the Mount of Olives and its return from the Mount of Olives to the temple. Ezekiel the prophet saw and described that departure and return. The glory of the Lord departed from the temple, went out, and stood on the east gate, before going up to and standing on the mountain, east side of the city, i.e. Mount of Olives (10:3-4, 18,19; 11:22,23) (Green, 2009: 158). Ezekiel 43:1-4 describes how the same glory would come back from the way of the east (undoubtedly Mountain of Olives) and came into the (post-Babylonian captivity) temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east (43:1-4).

This all fits Jesus' entry into the temple from the eastern Mountain (Olives) through the eastern gate as the logical route of the procession would dictate. But to understand fully that return from the eastern Mountain through the eastern gate, we need to take a look at another OT prophecy, that of Haggai. The statement of Haggai 2:3 is very revealing on the status of the temple that was being rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity. "Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?" There was no ark of covenant in the second temple. The Jewish tradition states that Jeremiah hid the Ark in a cave in Mount Nebo before the Babylonian invasion, and that its location would not be revealed until God was ready for it to be found (2 Macc 2:4-8). However, God promised that His glory would return to the temple. And its glory would be greater than that of the first temple. God in person was in the temple (ibid).

Jesus' healing of the blind and the lame shows his authority to create purity in all those desiring to worship God, demonstrating that as the One who is greater than the temple (12:6), he fulfils the Old Testament prescriptions for cleansing that the temple practices required to come into the presence of God. Such inclusion is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:8, "Behold I will bring them from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame." The entrance of the blind and lame into and their healing in the temple was a tangible demonstration of Jesus' words: the temple is the house of prayer of all nations

(Matt 21:13). It is all-inclusive. Besides, their healing was not merely physical. It carries a clear message of renewal and restoration. Their full membership in the people of God is reconstituted and restored.

Contemporary Challenges to the Church

Although many interpretations of the Old Testament views of disability have led to a discriminatory and exclusive approach when viewing persons with disabilities, it is important to point out that the issue took a different approach in the New Testament. In the New Testament, as well as Jesus' healing ministry, there are examples of disabled people portrayed in a positive way, and of God using disability for good in people's lives (cf. John 9:1-7; Acts 3:1-9). Grant argues that the healing stories of Jesus have served as proof of the moral imperfection of persons with disabilities. By contrast, Jesus Christ provided evidence that it is not always true that disabilities are caused by sin, but for the sake that the glory of God will be manifested (John 9:1-3) (Colleen, 1997:77). The gospels show Jesus Christ as sensitive and caring towards persons with disabilities. They are the main focus of his healing ministry (Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52).

The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) defines the place of persons with disabilities in the life of the Kingdom of God. The parable shows that Jesus Christ, in both word and action, sets persons with a disability within the circle of unity of the Christian church. The Acts of Apostles also gives evidence of how the early church had compassion and concern for persons with disabilities. All this evidence shows that persons with disabilities are part of the mission agenda of God. Furthermore, countless healing in the Old and New Testaments provides proof of the compassionate nature of God. Despite the fact that not all illnesses, diseases, or disabilities were removed, the kingdom of God is not complete without persons with disabilities (Rayan, 2015).

The mission of the church is not only to preach the gospel, but also to be concerned for the welfare of the people within and outside the Church (Ross & Walls, 2008:254). The biblical idea on justice envisions human relationships to be balanced, reciprocal and of quality (Johannes, 2012: 51) in order to fulfil the life-giving mission of the Triune God (Jooseop, **2013:4**). More so, the ultimate goal of

mission is to present “love, equality, diversity, mercy, compassion and justice” (Andrew, 199:132) throughout God’s creation. Furthermore, the appropriate response to disability is not medical treatment or rehabilitation, but social change and radical political action for justice, inclusion and full citizenship for people with disabilities (Swinton, 2011:279).

According to Wilkes, persons with disabilities form an integral part of the church and society; they are essential for the wholeness and unity of the Church (Wilkes, 1980:40). It is also essential that churches develop an inclusive attitude towards persons with disability and welcome them into Christian fellowship (Atieno, 2009:14). Govig submits that the church must recognise the spiritual and material needs of persons with disabilities and their families, and respond in a Christ-like manner (Stewart, 1989:98).

Meeting the Spiritual needs of Persons with Disabilities

The issue of meeting the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities challenges the mission of the church, especially in the area of miraculous healing. The New Testament records many miracles and healing wrought by Jesus Christ. Yet Jesus did not remove every disease and infirmity in His immediate proximity. Scripture records that, upon returning to His hometown, “he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith” (Matt 13:58). In John 5, Jesus Christ healed only one of the many disabled people who had gathered at the pool of Bethesda to seek a supernatural expectation of physical healing. One can learn from this that, if prayer for healing is not immediately answered, it does not change one’s theology to say that God no longer heals.

Mashau and Mangoedi submit that, in reading Acts 3:1-10, it is clear, without a doubt, that worshippers in the temple in Jerusalem were either ignorant or insensitive to the lame man’s spiritual need to belong, to be part of their community and to be able to call the Church his home. His longing to belong could only be satisfied when he was healed. Once he was healed, the man entered the temple walking, jumping and worshipping. This demonstrates how important it is to see the spiritual longing of persons with disabilities. The argument, in this instance, is not only to seek their miraculous healing, but also

to see them as part of the community of believers and participate in the *missio Dei* without any sense of discrimination (Mashau and Mangoedi, 2015: 5).

Furthermore, inclusivity in addressing the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities gives the church the opportunity to share the healing and restorative power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, as Peter did in Acts 3. Whether the Church is involved in the provision of care, rehabilitation, chaplaincy or ministry to, or with disabled people, it must recognise the central assumptions of equality and dignity within the Christian message and promote it on its mission agenda.

Discipleship

The Church's participation in the *Missio Dei* should be holistically inclusive. This implies that there is, therefore, the need for clergies and workers (ministers) who are well formed and prepared to address disability issues. There is also the need to institutionalise disability issues in the seminaries and theological Institutes, in order to ensure that the enthusiasm to disciple persons with disabilities does not fade. Furthermore, churches should have a well-defined programme to reach out to persons with disabilities and to engage people trained in sign language, ability to read and teach with Braille. Efforts should be made to provide Braille discipleship materials, bibles, as well as audio-visual and hearing aids for the blind.

As part of the discipleship agenda, persons with disabilities should be encouraged to actively participate in the activities of the church. Their gifts and talents should be accepted and used in the church. According to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the church must remove physical, emotional and spiritual barriers in order to bring in persons with disabilities and charge them, through discipleship and training, to use their spiritual gifts and God-given talents in building the Body of Christ (World Evangelization, 2010).

Prophetic Role

As part of the proclamation (evangelisation) mandate of the Church, it was also assigned a prophetic role of advocacy. The Church must continue to echo her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless. The Church must denounce and

combat all that degrades and destroys people. Churches are, therefore, required to raise awareness throughout society, regarding persons with disabilities, and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities; to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life, and to promote awareness of the capabilities and contribution of persons with disabilities. The faith community should be informed that the church is the best place for persons with disabilities to experience the sincere love of God and to feel accepted.

Although it is fitting to address the needs of persons with disabilities, it will be a great joy when they can do things for themselves (Robert, 1999: 200); this calls for empowering persons with disabilities by creating opportunities such as vocational education and employment.

Conclusion

Since human beings are made in the image of God, this makes it important that every person be treated equally with respect and dignity. This implies that persons with disabilities are made in the image of God and, therefore, deserve all the rights and freedom enjoyed by persons without disabilities. Using Proverbs 31:8 as the starting point for the article, it was noted that the Church has a missionary call to serve as the prophetic voice for the marginalised in society. Due to the fact that persons with disabilities form part of the marginalised in society, it is thus imperative that their rights be respected, promoted and preserved.

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