

JOHN SWINTON

INTRODUCTION: Just to welcome you back but very much to welcome Professor John Swinton. I have to confess I've sat at his feet before. A long term friend of Larch and we had a conference up in Aberdeen University where John is professor a couple of years ago with John Vanier as well, which was absolutely wonderful. So to welcome him here this morning. He's also a minister of the Church of Scotland and very much into what we're all into, so it's great to welcome him and to apologise to him that we're 10 minutes late on behalf of all of us who were late. John, the floor is yours.

(APPLAUSE)

I forgive you all for being late.

(LAUGHTER)

You're absolved ... (LAUGHS) ...

It's a great pleasure to be here and to be able to share some things with you this morning. I hope that what we've been able to work together is going to be not just learning new knowledge but it's going to be able to transform our lives in important ways. So I'm looking forward to being able to help you to think about some things maybe a little bit differently but before I do, can anybody tell me what the word dissonance means? Dissonance. It's a good word.

(VOICE FROM AUDIENCE)

Out of synch. Exactly. Out of synch. Dissonance occurs when you expect to see one thing and you see something else. Right? You expect the world to be one way and suddenly it's different. So, for example, if a very handsome Afro Caribbean man stands in front of you ...

(LAUGHTER)

That wasn't a joke.

(LAUGHTER)

You see, that's what happens when I hang out with Catholics. They just laugh at me.

(LAUGHTER)

So when you see an Afro Caribbean and he speaks with a Scottish accent ...

(LAUGHTER)

... then you experience dissonance. So dissonance blocks communication, so get over your dissonance and we can get along a bit better.

(LAUGHTER)

But I want you to hold on to that word dissonance. I'm sorry that you can only see the side of my face and my back side. It brings its own blessings but not very much.

(LAUGHTER)

I want you to hold on to that word dissonance. OK? That idea that sometimes when you see the world the way you expect it to be, it turns out to be radically different because that word dissonance I think is very important for how we understand disability.

Now, the title of this conference intrigued me. Called By Name. At one level, it's a very intuitively warm and comforting concept that somehow God calls you by name and you respond and you find yourself defined in a particular way. But what if you're deaf? What does being called by name mean if you can't hear that call? What if you've got Alzheimer's? What does being called by name mean when you've forgotten what your name is? What if you've got a profound intellectual disability, what does it mean if you actually don't process your name in the way that the majority of people assume that you should process your name? So what does being called by name mean within that context, that broad context of what we've chosen to call disability? At Aberdeen we have a distance learning pastoral care course. It's a really interesting thing. You kind of sit in a room with 12 people in the room and then maybe half a dozen people on the phone and various other things and you as a co-ordinator have got to kind of manipulate this through and this year we had somebody in the room who was absolutely blind and somebody else who was profoundly deaf and she had an interpreter plus she had a hearing dog, a dog that kind of answers the phone ... well, it doesn't answer the phone ...

(LAUGHTER)

Well, maybe it does, I never asked that actually, maybe it does.

(LAUGHTER)

Maybe I should have asked. But it tells her when the doorbell rings and the phone rings and all that sort of stuff. It was great. But trying to manipulate all that or to organise and facilitate all that, you can imagine it was complicated, some people in the room, some people not in the room. But at one point in the proceedings, we began to talk about spiritual experiences and the woman who was deaf, through her interpreter, began to tell us about this wonderful experience that she had where she had a vision or she dreamt that she had gone to heaven and she met Jesus and she said, he was exactly the way that I hoped he would be, you know, he was wonderful.

(VOICE FROM AUDIENCE)

(LAUGHTER)

No I can't actually.

(LAUGHTER)

I'm not saying anything at all.

(VOICE FROM AUDIENCE)

Sorry.

(LAUGHTER)

You see, heavenly voices all around me.

(LAUGHTER)

And she told a story of how she began to experience Jesus and then she said at the end of that, and his signing was amazing.

(LAUGHTER)

Isn't that interesting? Her understanding of heaven, her understanding of God and perfection was not that her disability was taken away. It was simply that God was able to communicate with her in the way that she'd always communicated and there's something really important about how we frame and understand disability in that story. Maybe our task is not to rehabilitate. Maybe our task is not to normalise. Maybe our task is just to enable people to live well irrespective of where they are, where they've come from, what their experiences are. Maybe we've misunderstood what this term disability actually means and when you think about, what does disability mean? I mean, we've talked a lot about disability in the conference thus far but what is it? Disability is simply something that groups of people get together and decide to label particular people under that. So we take particular experiences, particular body shapes, particular notions of physical experiences and we say, this is what disability is. But why is it? Why is that shape? Why is it the shape that we construct it to be? Why is it the way that we make it to be? Because if you look at the way that disability develops over history, it's always changing what we consider disability to be. And so we're quite free it seems to pick and choose and decide what disability is. Now, we can decide it is a medical thing. We can say it's pathology, it's something wrong with people. We can say it's a psychological thing or we can say it's a spiritual thing and we could give ourselves a different definition of disability.

How about this? Disability is one way of living well in a complex world. Disability is one way of living well within a complex world. And if we take it within that frame, it looks quite different because it's to do with enabling all of us to find the good life and to live well. It's not to do with suffering, it's not to do with pain although suffering and pain may be experienced by people with disabilities in the same way it is by all of us. It's not to do with medicine, it's not to do with social services. It's to do with us as the body of the Christ, enabling one another in a complicated world to live well. There's

an interesting philosopher called Charles Taylor who has done some very good work on multi culturalism and what he notices is that the way in which people recognise one another is determinative of the kind of politics and attitudes and ways of being that they'll have towards that particular person or groups of people. And one of the interesting things, although his book's not about disabilities, is he notices that within our culture, we recognise disability in quite particular ways which are profoundly negative. Within our culture, people with disabilities are recognised in ways. In other words, we call their names but not necessarily in ways which will bring blessing and there's something important about that recognition because why is it that we recognise disability in such a negative way, even those of us who are involved with caring and working and being with people with disabilities, often times in our minds we recognise them in strange, strange ways. And I think it's something to do with the way in which we're taught, the way in which we're taught by our culture to prioritise certain things in human beings and de-prioritise other things.

Now, the focus of this talk that I want you to be thinking about is, what does it mean to know God when you have a profound intellectual disability, when you're unable to understand language, whether it's through brain damage, whether it's through dementia, whether it's through some kind of congenital thing. When you're unable to understand language in the way that we do, how do we understand what it means to know God? And culture teaches us certain things. For example, and Timothy picked up on this yesterday ... culture teaches us that reason and intellect are important and often times theology teaches us that reason and intellect are important, that we need to know certain things about God in order to know God. Now, where do we get that idea from? We don't get that idea from scripture, where Paul tells us that the reason of this world is foolishness. We get it from culture and then we take it into ourselves and we'll say, yes that's an important, the important aspect of being human, to be reasonable, to be intellectual. And we get this idea that we're individuals, that we're strong, radical, discreet individuals who make our own course in life, who produce our own history. But where do we get that from? We don't get that from the body of Christ. We get that from culture. We're taught that these things are important. It's interesting if you look ... I've been working recently with Ubuntu theology which is an African theology and within that, the assumption is that everybody is inextricably interlinked, that I am because we are, rather than I am because I am. I am because we are. And, you know, we're going through a financial crisis just now and one of the things that we need to learn from all of that is how inter dependent we are, even at a political and economic level. It's almost like God is saying to us, if we take the blessing, you know, I'm stripping away this stuff and I'm showing you your dependency, I'm showing you that you are because we are. But we take that on board, we construct our understanding of what it means to be human, not according to scripture tradition or the wonderful blessings that God's given to us, but according to the way that our culture tells us things should be. But if you think about it, in a culture where such things as friendships, relationships, compassion, dependency were perceived as primary social goods, there would be no such thing as intellectual disability. It simply wouldn't exist because it wouldn't matter. It only matters in a particular way because of the way in which our culture teaches us it should matter. And likewise with the idea of beauty and perfection. Where do we get this idea ... I don't know about you ... when I think about heaven, I think about myself as a Greek Adonis marching around ...

(LAUGHTER)

... surrounded by Baywatch babes.

(LAUGHTER)

I don't really. Well, I probably do.

(LAUGHTER)

But I mean, with the exception of myself, where do we get the idea of beauty and perfection?

(LAUGHTER)

Yeah, you noticed, that's good.

(LAUGHTER)

You know, we get it from culture. We don't get it from the images of the broken Christ in Isaiah, we don't get it from the way that scripture defines the upturning of the world and that which we think is beautiful and reasonable is radically different in the Kingdom. And even when we think about the way in which we construct our understandings of Jesus, where do we get these from? You know, was Jesus fat? Was Jesus bald? All of these things. And what we discover quite quickly is that our understandings of Jesus, our understandings of God often times it's just ourselves made bigger. And so when we begin to look for the image of God in people with disabilities, we naturally say, well there's something wrong here because the image of God is me made bigger. But actually, if we accept the blessing, we might discover that the image of God is something quite, quite different.

Stanley Hauerwas, a very interesting and helpful theologian, talks about the face of God being the face of the disabled and I was thinking when I watched the dances last night, what a wonderful image that would be, the image of God as we watch the faces of the disabled. I think there's something beautiful about that but that's dissonant and that's a radically different understanding. But if we take these things on board, then we can no longer look at disability in the way that we did before.

And all I'd like to say, what then does it mean to know God? You know, I work in a university and I know a lot of people that know a lot about God but I actually don't know a lot of people who know God and I want us to think about what it might mean to know God. A colleague of mine, Margaret Hutchison, who is a nurse working in Adelaide in Australia, tells a story about a woman with serious dementia and she's normally a very passive woman but on this occasion she started to become very agitated and she would walk up and down the corridor of the ward repeating the same word over and over and over again. Now, the ward team got together and they began to talk about how they should respond. Should they restrain her? Should they increase her medication? These are kind of natural ways of responding within a medical context. But one nurse who was a Christian got alongside this woman and she walked up and down the corridor with her and the word that the

woman was saying over and over again was God. She was saying, God, God, God, God. And the nurse suddenly realised what was going on and she said to the woman, are you afraid that you're going to forget God? And she stopped dead and she said, yes, I'm afraid. I've been a Christian all my life and I'm afraid I'm going to forget God. And the nurse said to her, well, you will forget God but God will never forget you. And I think there's something really important there. Knowing God hasn't to do with what we have or what we don't have, what we can offer or what we can't offer. It's to do with what God offers us. In that case, to hold her in his memory. In all of us, to give us the opportunity and the possibility of being loved beyond all things.

So when we come to the idea of knowing God ... let me read you a little passage from scripture ... the Apostle Paul says this, he says, "But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved." Now, that's a profoundly important passage in terms of how we understand and frame disability. If it's by grace that we are saved, then there's nothing we can do. It's all gift. It's all gift. It's all gift. So when we come to people with profound and cognitive intellectual disabilities, we're not really looking to see, well this person can't understand this doctrine, this person can't understand this thing here, actually we're beginning to see that as we enter into the life of this individual, as we begin to think through what he or she brings to our theology, they simply remind us that their situation is all of our situation, where it's all gift and that we're all dependent in that way. And that I think takes us back to the contemplative tradition within which we seek to love God, not for anything that God can give to us but simply for God's sake. But it's interesting the contemplatives try to push beyond reason and intellect in very interesting ways, to get beyond reason and intellect because that's a blockage to experiencing the love of God and to get to that place where you just love God for God's sake. Why? Because that's exactly the way that God loves us because God doesn't love us for what we can do, he doesn't love us for what we know, he simply loves us for our own sake. And if we take that as the basis for our understanding of disability across the board but in particular our understanding of disability with those who have profound and complex needs where we assume that somehow there's a blockage to God, actually we discover something else. We discover that perhaps the blockage to God is ourselves, our own intellect, our own reason, our own pushing towards certain forms of knowledge that push ourselves to the fore. Whereas God says, it's all grace. It's all gift.

So when we begin to think about that contemplative spirituality, the title I was given for this session was a spirituality of disability, we begin to discover that in fact a spirituality of disability may not be something for the disabled, it may simply be for all of us. We may discover as we encounter experiences with those who we've chosen to label disabled, but the bottom line is that the spirituality of disability is a spirituality of humanness. And when we think in these ways, everything begins to shift and change. The question there is, how do we embody that contemplative spirituality in our day to day lives in ways that will transform our understandings of any kind of us and them relationship to a place where we really begin to see that we are looking at how all together we can live well under the sovereignty of God. And when we turn to the gospels, we find the solution maybe. It's quite simple.

When Jesus in the Book of John says to his disciples, I no longer call you servants, I call you friends, that was a profound change in the way that we need to see ourselves and I want to suggest to you that friendship understood in a Christ like fashion enables us to embody that contemplative spirit and to begin to live with those whom we choose to notice differently and to recognise differently because the friendships of Jesus were radically different. Two things at least. First of all, they weren't based on the principle of likeness. If you think about the way our friendships are in our culture, we're very kind of Aristotelian in the way that we develop our friendships. We enter into friendships in order to get something from the other person. So I'll be friends with you as long as you give me the necessary social and relational goods that will make me happy, happiness being basically self fulfilment. Now, if you don't give me these, then I won't be your friend. So most of our friends tend to be with people that are very like ourselves, so like tends to attract like. But when we look at the friendships of Jesus, it's quite, quite different on two levels. First of all, the incarnation itself is an example of the way in which that which is radically not like us becomes like us and enters into a relationship but all of Jesus' friendships were like that. He entered into friendships with those whom society discarded, those whom society turned away, those who were very much not like him. And so there's a really interesting dynamic within Christian friendship that's based on that principle of contemplative grace rather than the principle of likeness. But the second thing and tied in with that is that when you look at the ministry of Jesus and the way that he related with people, hospitality was right at the centre of all that and within that model of hospitality, he was sometimes guest and he was sometimes host. And that kind of graceful friendships like that. Sometimes you're guest, sometimes you're host. In other words, I'm not asking you to go out and be friends with people with profound and complex learning and intellectual disabilities. I'm asking you to look at what friendship means when you're receiving and giving, when you're guest and host with the individual who chooses you to be their friend. And when we begin to think about our relationships in that graceful way, everything begins to look differently. And one of the interesting things about Jesus' graceful friendships, often times we talk about Jesus sitting with the marginalised. I don't think that's right. I don't think Jesus did sit with the marginalised because I think what you see in the gospels is a shifting of the margins. When Jesus sits with the tax collectors and the sinners, when Jesus sits with those whom society and religious society has chosen to exclude from their communities, he shifts the boundaries of the community and so now those who thought that they had knowledge of God, those who thought that they had social, political and religious power were on the margins and God's over here doing something very, very different. And that's probably a warning that the church, all of us, should take on board. Could it be that God's here doing something else with those whom we call marginalised and we're over here doing something quite different? Could it be that God is calling us not to sit with the marginalised or the poor but to change the margins, to build a new community within which the marginalised will look quite differently because they will be the respectable authorities, they will be those people who have particular forms of knowledge that is valued by our culture. But over here, God will be doing what God always does, transforming, changing ... not just people with disabilities but all of us into this new community, this new body of Christ within which strength and weakness all shift and change.

Philosopher Joseph Pieper says a wonderful thing and I'm just coming towards the end of what I'm going to say to you. He defines Christian love in these terms. He says, "Christian love is saying to the other, it's good that you exist, it's good that you are here." And it seems to me when we look at the attitudes and the values that emerge from our society towards those whom we choose to call disabled, it's the exact opposite of that. It's not good that we exist, it's not good that we are here. And we make these huge judgements on the basis of what we assume to be normal, what we assume to be perfect, what we assume to be the way things are. When in fact the dissonance of the coming Kingdom is telling us again and again, everything you see is wrong. And it was fascinating watching the dancers last night because I know that in the United Kingdom and I know that in France, there are more people with Downs Syndrome being aborted than being born. Indeed, I read somewhere recently that within Europe many of the organisations and many of the institutions that were set up to look after people with Downs Syndrome are now having to either close down or take in other people because there simply aren't people around. Now, that's not saying to people who we choose to name as different, it's good that you exist, it's good that you are here. But the Christian community is called to enter into this graceful contemplative spirituality within which graceful contemplative friendships emerge which transform our understanding of what disability is, transform our practices within our congregations and enable us in real senses to reveal the Kingdom because sometimes people need to see the Kingdom and maybe through our reflection on disability, through our recognition that really we do make a lot of that stuff up, we can become the type of people within which disability exists but doesn't matter and perhaps that's our vision and perhaps that's our joy.

Thank you for listening.

(APPLAUSE)

John, thank you very much indeed. That complements everything that's been said.