

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

INTRODUCTION: And now ladies and gentlemen, I introduce our first speaker of the conference and of the weekend, Father Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominican Order.

Good evening everybody. It's a tremendous pleasure and honour for me to be with you here tonight at Lourdes. It's a place that I love, I've been to many times and the first time was about 40 years ago with HCPT. And the topic that I've been asked to talk about is the role of people with disabilities in the life and mission of the church and I have to confess I feel very inadequate addressing this. I don't suffer from any major disability myself. My brethren may disagree with that of course. I've had very little experience of working with people with disabilities and so I'm profoundly aware of how inadequate I am really to address this issue. So all I can say is, please accept what's useful and forgive what isn't.

I often begin lectures with a story but this time I'm really going to mean it. One of my ... can you hear me? Yeah? One of my brethren in America, in Chicago, gave a lecture and when he sat down, the applause was rather tepid. So he sat down and he said to the person beside him, he said, "It wasn't that bad, was it?" And the man said, "Oh, I don't blame you at all," he said, "I just blame the people who asked you to come and talk in the first place".

(LAUGHTER)

Do you think it's a bit stuffy in here? Shall I open a window? How do we do it? Is there some competent person who can do a John the 23rd Act? Thank you, thank you Richard. Because you're looking a bit sleepy. I'm actually a bit sleepy too, I only had 3 hours sleep last night, so I have a strong urge to curl up in a ball. If I do, cough loudly. I hope I won't be like the cabinet minister, you know, who dreamt that he was addressing the House of Lords and then woke up to find he was doing so.

(LAUGHTER)

So the role of people with disabilities in the life and mission of the church. And the first thing is to say that this is fundamental and it's because it's at the centre of our faith, of our Catholicism, is the fact that we are bodily people. Many religions make a great separation between the mind and the body, as if the body's a sort of inconvenient baggage, you know, to get rid off, to escape from. But in a Catholic tradition, it's in our bodily spiritual life, one life, that we encounter God and so people who suffer from disabilities of mind or body have a lot to teach us because they struggle with where God comes to us. One of the things that astonished the Pagans in the early round when the Christians arrived was how we went during the great plagues to care for the bodies of the sick. We even cared for the bodies of people who weren't Christian and this absolutely bowled people over because people's bodies and our minds are part of who we are profoundly. When I was in the coach, the mini bus on the way from the airport about a couple of hours ago, I passed a sign which said that this is the part of the world which is the centre of the Cathars and that was a religion, a heresy which said that our bodies are bad, sexuality is bad, the world, the creative world was made by an evil God. The Dominicans actually were set up to oppose them, you know. We always say the Dominicans were set up to oppose the Cathars and the Jesuits, to oppose the Protestants. Who's done better? When did you last meet a Cathar?

(LAUGHTER)

But it's wonderful that here, right in the centre of this land, you see the sanctuary of Lourdes where we care for people's bodies because our bodies are a place of holiness, a place of encounter with God. Jesus gave us the supreme sacrifice, his body. Take it, this is my body, it's given for you. He died bodily for us. He arose bodily from the dead and that's our hope, that our bodies will rise because that's who we are and the sacraments consecrate the bodily dramas of our life, birth and death, eating, drinking, sex. These are where we meet God in the sacraments. This is where we meet the one who said to us, "This is my body and I give it to you." When I was a very young Dominican, I met an old French brother called Jacques who'd

suffered all sorts of scars of his mind and his body and he wrote a beautiful novel called *Les Cicatrices, the scars*. And in the book he wrote, you know ... (TALKING IN FRENCH) ... that the scars can become the doors of light. And every one of us who has scars, and we all do, we all have wounds, whether it's mental or physical, and for every one of us, the challenge is to see how they become doors of life and light.

Now, the title of the overall conference is, *I Have Called You By Name*. For a Christian, everything exists because God called it by name. He said, "Let there be light" and there was light. He said, "Let there be rabbits, tigers, oak trees" and there were. Everything exists because God summons it into existence. There's a lovely passage I love in the Prophet Baruch, "The stars shone in their watches and were glad because he called to them and they said, here we are, here we are. They shone with gladness for him who made them." So a star isn't just a bald fact, you know, something that's just there. When a star shines, it's saying joyfully to God, here we are. Now this isn't against the doctrine or the teaching of science, the idea that 13 and a half billion years ago there was a big bang. That's not in contradiction with that scientific theory. There's no reason why as Christians we can't accept science. But it is to say that if you want to understand why there is anything, if you want to get to a deeper sense of our purpose, the meaning of our lives, you have to tell another sort of story, a more poetic story, a story about the God who calls everything to himself.

Now, human beings say yes to God not just by existing like rabbits and stars. We say it by our words. We can say to God, here I am. When Moses was walking through the desert, he came across this burning bush and he heard a voice saying, "Moses, Moses" and he said, "Yes, here I am." When Samuel, young Samuel was sleeping in the temple and several times he heard this voice calling him, "Samuel, Samuel", he went to Eli the high priest. He said, "Here I am, do you want me?" And finally the priest said no. Next time you hear it say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Once when I was a student, a Dominican student, I was walking past the door of the student master and I could have sworn I heard him say, "Timothy", so I knocked and I said, "Geoffrey, what do you want?" and he said, "Next time say, speak Lord, your servant heareth."

(LAUGHTER)

So to be a human being, the human vocation, the vocation every one of us has is to hear the Lord who calls us and to say, "Here I am, speak Lord" and respond. Now, of course, we don't literally hear a voice, at least I don't. Most people who do are considered slightly odd. We don't hear a mobile going and turn it on and find a voice saying Timothy ... from God, you know. But we do hear the voice of God who calls us in the silence, in our hearts, through strangers, through friends. And what I want to say this evening is that often especially through people with disabilities. Often because in those who have some suffering, that we hear the voice of God calling to us. So to exist, for me to exist, for you to exist, isn't just a fact. It's to be called to come to God.

And the first point I really want to make, which is very important, is that that is true wherever we start from. We may find ourselves in hospital with some terrible illness but we are still addressed by the God who says, "Come to me". We may find ourselves in a situation of suffering, mourning the death of somebody we love but God still says to us, "Come". We may find ourselves in prison, having committed a terrible crime, it doesn't matter where we are, it doesn't matter who we are, we're still summoned to come to God. And that is the source of our hope. There is nobody in any situation however dark, however dreadful, even when there seems no way through, there is nobody who isn't called to come to God. And that's the foundation of our hope and I think that people with disabilities are particularly witnesses to that hope.

Now, our society is living through a terrible crisis of hope, when the future is not clear. When I was a young Dominican friar in the 60s, we were filled with optimism, we were going to change the world, you know. Africa was being liberated from imperialist rule, starvation would soon be over. The Beatles were enchanting us all, even English cooking was getting better, so the Kingdom of God must be nigh.

(LAUGHTER)

But now, 40 years later, it's not so evident. What are the stories you tell your young? Ecological catastrophe, the war on terrorism. So how are we to give hope to the young? I think one of the great witnesses are people with disability who face the world courageously, who are preachers of hope, witnesses to trust in God's endless care. I think your hope when you face challenges like that speaks to us all. I'm not saying that God deliberately creates people with disabilities so that they may be witnesses, that's not true, that would give a terrible impression of a God who was a cruel tyrant. I met a remarkable woman the other day who had been stabbed in the neck and left paralysed and she was able to, with her husband, offer forgiveness to the young people who'd done it. Now, God didn't plan that. God didn't say, oh she'd be a tremendous witness, let's give her a disaster. But God's endless creative grace was with her so that she could offer that extraordinary witness. And the deeper the challenges that we face, the more that we can be radiant witnesses to hope. I go to visit sometimes a prison in Massachusetts in the United States called Lawford State Penitentiary. There are a group of prisoners there, mainly they've committed murder, they're mainly in for life but they fell in love with the Dominican tradition and they are now ... we have a beautiful fraternity of lay Dominicans, nearly all of whom committed murder. And I remember a wonderful day I had with them where we were asking about what was their role as preachers in the prison and they could see that their role was to be preachers of hope in a dark, despairing place, with people who are condemned to prison for life probably never to escape. They witness to our hope in Jesus Christ. And many people who are disabled do this powerfully and beautifully.

What's the foundation of that hope that we may have in the darkest place? It is the sacrament that we celebrate every week, that we'll celebrate tomorrow, the sacrament of the Eucharist. So that takes us back to the darkest moment in human history, which was the Last Supper. That was the time when everything was coming to pieces, when Judas had betrayed Jesus, when Peter was about to deny him, when all the disciples were planning their exit strategies. At that moment when there seemed to be no future, when everything was dark and bleak, at that moment, Jesus made an incredibly creative gesture. He took bread and broke it and said, "This is my body given for you". He gave us a sacrament of hope.

Once I was travelling through Rwanda at right at the very beginning of the genocide. Everything was coming to bits, the country was on fire as we drove through this suffering land. We were pulled out of our car, machetes and pistols put at our heads. I didn't think we were going to survive the day. Made our way to a hospital filled with young kids who'd lost their limbs with mines. I remember one particular kid lost 2 legs and an arm and an eye and his father beside him weeping. And then we went back to the Dominican Sister's house filled with bullet holes from fighting the previous day and I wondered, what could I say? I couldn't think of any word I could offer. And then I remembered there was something that we could do, which is the foundation of all Christian hope. We could celebrate the Eucharist, which takes us back to that darkest night when Jesus gave us a sign of hope. So that's what gives us the courage to go forward. So people with disabilities perhaps who have to endure terrible struggles and wonder what is the meaning of their lives can be our great apostles, the great witnesses of how there is a way forward when there seems to be none.

A few months ago I was in Zimbabwe and I was taken to a place called Mashambanzu. It is an AIDS clinic. Mashambanzu means literally the time when the elephants wash. Now, I don't know about Lourdes but in Zimbabwe, the elephants go down to wash first thing in the morning, they squirt water at each other, they play in the mud. And so it is a time of the dawn and of hope. And what bowled me over was how this AIDS clinic, again filled mainly with young people aged less than 18, was a place of joy, extraordinary joy and courage. I remember one young kid whose name was Courage, who filled the whole place with laughter. That is a beautiful witness. So when you go to the baths in Lourdes, think of those lovely elephants.

But we're not only called by God, we call each other. We transmit that vocation within the church. I remember once going walking with a group of my brethren in Scotland on the Isle of Skye and we followed this path along the sea front and we came to a terrible moment when the path disappeared and, to go any further, you had to stick your legs in a cleft and feel your way along and when we emerged at the other end, we found there was one brother missing called Gareth and one of us had to creep back all the way along the cliff front till finally we found him and we hadn't

realised that he suffered from vertigo and he was trembling. So one of us had to say, well move your hand over Gareth, OK now, move your foot, your left foot, now take my hand. No, no, no, he said, I won't take anybody, we'll both go in the sea. Till finally we emerged at the other end. Now, for me, that's a sort of parable about how we call each other, we invite each other into courage, into freedom, to continue on the journey.

And today you're giving me courage, you see. Tomorrow, maybe I will be able to give you some courage. I'm reminded rather irrelevantly of the man who was driving along on a cliff in his car thinking about whether God existed or not and he got so carried away that he forgot to watch where he was going and he went over the cliff and as he was falling, he managed to cling to the branch of a tree. Hanging over the abyss, suddenly the question of whether God existed or not became urgent. So he shouted out, "Is there anybody there? Is there anybody there? Save me." And he heard a voice and it said, "Yes, my son. There is somebody there. Just let go of the branch and I will catch you." So he thought for a little while and he said, "Is there anybody else there?"

(LAUGHTER)

So we call to each other, we give each other strength and hope out of the sufferings that we have. I think of a girl I knew, a woman in the Philippines who was a leper. She'd been taken into the leprosarium which is run by a part of our Dominican family when she was a child and even after she'd been cured of her leprosy, she never dared come out because she didn't want to see the look on people's face. And then one day she realised that her scars, her wounds could be a gift for others. So she developed a mission of travelling around Asia, going to leprosaria, trying to give people the courage to come out, come out into the open and not be afraid to be seen. So that's the first thing I want to stress, is that to be human is to have a vocation, is to be called by the God who summons us to come to him and that's the foundation of our hope and, in this, people with disabilities are perhaps some of our greatest apostles.

But there's another element. God calls to us and he summons us to be with his powerful creative life-giving word. He says, "Timothy" and Timothy exists, though you may come to regret this before long. And we are made in the image and likeness of God, which means that every single one of us has the vocation to speak life-giving words to other people. That is one of the ways in which we are Godlike, made in God's image. We spend a lot of our day talking, gossiping, joking, listening to the news, making conversation. And all the time we are making the most important moral choice about whether we speak a word to other people that gives life, hope, that builds them up or whether we speak a mean, subverting, gossipy, negative word that destroys people. That's the most important moral choice we usually make every day. For some reason, people seem to think that morality is basically about sex. It isn't. What morality is about is whether we are partners with God in granting words that give life to other people. Whether we give words that sustain and encourage, that beckon people on.

One of the ways that evil appears in our world is through destructive words. During the Rwandan genocide, we could see written all over the walls words like, "Kill the cockroaches" or in Zimbabwe I remember President Mugabe had a campaign called Moorambatsvia, Clean up the Rubbish. In other words, the people who he considered to be his opponents. Although Nazis think about how they talked of the Jews, they kill them with their words before they kill them in the gas ovens. They call them vermin and rats and dogs. Now, we don't in our Western society face genocide but our lives are filled with negative contemptuous words that trash other people. Journalists, politicians, football supporters, sometimes even religious leaders speak words that hurt, hurt the poor, hurt people with disabilities, immigrants, gay people that are burnt by corrosive words. A chap that I met in Dublin the other day was tending to a wounded person, a person who was very sick and the doctor came in and said, "You are an unnecessary person, leave the room."

So the primary role I think of the church is to speak words that lift people up, let them breathe. Let me quote a friend of mine, Nick King's beautiful translation of Ephesians 4, 29. "Let no evil speech come from your mouth but nothing other than good speech to build people up in case of need in order that it may give grace to those who hear". We're called to speak words of grace and life. And very often in

my experience, it's precisely the people who've suffered, the people who have endured great pain, who speak the strongest words of life. I think again of one of my brethren ... sorry for talking about my brethren all the time but they're obviously the people I know best ... a wonderful Scottish Dominican called Anthony Ross, historian, rector of Edinburgh University, and one day he had a terrible stroke which absolutely silenced him. He was Provincial and he refused to resign being a stubborn man. It was wonderful for us to have a Provincial who couldn't say anything.

(LAUGHTER)

And after a lot of struggle and pain, finally, he learnt to say just a word or two but because those words were the fruit of such a struggle and so much pain, they had a power which was incomparable. They had something of that power of God and people used to flock from all over Scotland to go to confession, to ask for advice and often all he could offer them was just one word. Before I went to Rome when I was elected Master of the Order, I went to see him to say au revoir or goodbye as it turned out to be. And he just gave me that one word and he said, just said, "Courage". Courage. And that was food for me, that was nourishment, it was bread and wine for years.

So we see that people with disabilities can be signs of hope and speak words that are powerful, even when we are locked in beds but a time may come when we cannot even speak a word and we're silenced. One of the last times I came to Lourdes was with the French Dominican pilgrimage, Les Reserve. It's an enormous great thing, 40,000 pilgrims. And it was a difficult time for me to come because my mother was dying but since I was the preacher, I couldn't not come and the first day I remember going out to preach and I made a remark about my mother and every day, people would shout out when I went up to preach. They'd say, "How's your mother today? Give us a health bulletin." So when I went back to see my mother, I arrived just 3 or 4 hours before she died, it was wonderful to be able to say, "Well mother, we've had 40,000 people praying for you". But right at the end, when she could no longer say anything, she could offer a smile and that was her final preaching.

So God calls him to himself, us to himself, he invites us to come into the presence of his healing smile that says in Psalm 80, "Let your face shine on us and we shall be saved". We are the body of Christ and that means that we can offer that same loving smile to other people. As Pope Benedict wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, "Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities. I can give them the look of love for which they pray." So a voice that calls, creative healing words, finally perhaps a smile. But in the end, God just not only calls to himself. We're called into community. I've called you by name. These words are addressed by God to the exiles in Babylon, summoning them home. The exiles are called home to God and home to each other.

And I think that the final thing I want to mention is the mission of people with disabilities to call us into community. You have a special role in making us at home with you and in God. How does this happen? In the West, we have cultivated a very strange idea what it is to be a human being. Highly individualistic, macho, a lonely hero, the person who is all self sufficient. That is often the role, the image we have of the hero. But it's a profoundly inhuman image in the end because we are created to need each other. God said to St Catherine of Sienna, "I could have made each person self sufficient but I made you so that you would need each other." And very often, people with grave disabilities who have the need of other people to get up in the morning, to wash, to do anything, they are a sign to us of something which is fundamental to our humanity which is that we all need each other. None of us is an island. None of us is self sufficient.

Let me give you the example of one of my brothers. I live with a brother called Vincent who is about 82 now, he's been in the Order almost 60 years and he was born completely blind. He's never seen a human face in his life. But he's strong, independent and one of perhaps the most loved member of our Province. He goes everywhere where he can by himself with his cane. Once he went to Liverpool and he got to a street crossing and he waited for somebody to escort him over and when they were crossing, he heard all sorts of sound of traffic screeching to a halt and horns and everything and he got to the other side and he said, "Thank you so much for escorting me". And the other person said, "No, I'm blind, you escorted me".

(LAUGHTER)

Now, Vincent has an immensely important role in our life as a community. It's not just that he's lovable, it's not just that he's humorous, it's not just that he goes on working and peeling the vegetables and doing everything he can. It's because he draws us together into community. You cannot live in a community with somebody who's completely blind without in a sense crystallising around them and their needs. You know you can never leave anything in the corridor without saying, will Vincent fall over it? Every time you put the milk back in the fridge, you have to say, green milk on the left, blue milk on the right. We always have to be thinking of Vincent and as we gather around Vincent, we discover each other. We're drawn beyond our own self preoccupations to find each other around him and his needs. He liberates us you might say from self preoccupation. He summons us beyond this Western illusion that anybody is self sufficient. In his needs, we discover our own needs. He frees us to be brothers.

I think also in my experience people with disabilities often bring something special which nobody else has. Let me take the example of Vincent again. Last night I was having dinner with Vincent and he asked me where I was going. I said, "I'm going to Lourdes". I didn't tell him I was going to talk about him, he would have been extremely irritated. Because Vincent cannot see anything at all, he navigates by touch and by hearing. He uses his hearing to find his way around the community. Now, this means that he hears acutely, he hears ... he detects nuances in what people say that escape people like me. We put him on the formation commission for the formation of the young brothers because his very blindness opens him up to other people in a way that some of us are not. So that's a special discernment, a special perception that he brings to our common life. And now Vincent is old, he's blind and, alas, he's becoming deaf but still every morning you can see him very early, before anybody else is up, making his way down to sit in silence in the presence of the Lord, a witness to the end.

I'm reminded of one of our American brethren. He was staying with his own blood brother and his family and his brother, Ed, has a daughter who is completely deaf too and she came over to her Dominican uncle and started making signs and her father

summoned her over and said, "I'm awfully sorry, you know, Uncle John, he can't understand, you know, you can see, you can hear with your eyes and you can speak with your hands but he can't". And so she went over to her uncle the Dominican and said and she could speak and she said, "Uncle, I'm so very sorry for you. You can't hear with your eyes. You can't speak with your hands. But I can't hear with my ears. So we'll be able to help each other."

So where have we got to now? We're just staggering along towards the end. Hanging in there. Just a very, very last word about death. Many people who come to Lourdes come facing death. I don't think anybody who is fully alive can be fully alive unless they've dared to face their own mortality, to see that their years are limited. It's only if we dare to do that, that we learn to live in this present moment fully and strongly. And often when people face death, it's when they give their last preaching, their final witness to their hope. I mentioned Gareth who was walking along that cliff, you remember. Well, when Gareth was in his early 50s, he developed cancer and finally had to face death. I remember going to see him and I said to Gareth, "How are you? How are you coping?" He'd just learnt he'd only got about 4 or 5 months to go. And he said to me, "Timothy, I have 3 wishes. I would like to have time with those I love before I die. I would like to finish the book I'm writing", which he did the day before he died. And he said beautifully, he said, "I would like my death to be a gift for the brethren". And that I think is often the last gift we give to people, the way that we die.

Last story. There's a rather eccentric old Dominican called Gervais Matthew and a member of 4 faculties at Oxford University, and one day he telephoned me and asked me to come up to see him in hospital in Oxford. I was in London at the time. So I went up to see him and he said, "Timothy", he said, "I'm going to die tomorrow morning." He said, "I want you to go out to the off licence and I want you to buy some tins of beer so that we may drink to the Kingdom of God". So I went out weeping, tears pouring out and I bought the beer and we toasted the Kingdom of God and a nurse came by and she said, "Father Gervais, you know you're not allowed to drink anything with your pills". And he said, "Don't be a silly old thing, I'm going to die tomorrow morning", he said. So I said to him, I said, "Well Gervais, I'm due to give a lecture this evening, I'll just ring up and cancel it so I can be with you."

He said, "I've never stopped anybody teaching", he said, "Go and give the lecture", he said, "Come back tomorrow morning and I'll hang on till you get back".

(LAUGHTER)

So I hope we can see just a tiny little bit of what might be the role of people with disabilities in the life and mission of the church. First of all, in being witnesses to hope, to the God who summons us to himself wherever we may be, whatever we may endure, whatever suffering we may confront. Secondly, that that God is the one who sustains us all with living words, words that give life and often I have found in my experience with people with disabilities that they speak words of life, words that are born of their own suffering and even when the words are finished, there's still that echo of God's own smile. They summon us into community, they invite us to discover the truth of our own humanity, which is that none of us can cope alone. We all need each other if we are to flourish. And finally, they may invite us to confront our own death and to confront it with joy.

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)