

WELCOME TO THE DIFFERENTLY ABLE BODY

I. Introduction

Greetings to all authorities

I greet you all in the name of our Lord, Jesus-Christ! It is again honour that the MCSA through its Synod, gives me this opportunity to share and do the Bible Study together in this meeting.

I was impressed to see the theme of this conference, "Welcome to the differently able body". My understanding of this theme as it comes from the Church, is an invitation to everybody regardless of their bodies, their gender, their classes, their races, their status, cultures and their capacities.

This term "Differently abled body" is an inclusive term that some disability activists of the disability rights movement, prefer to use to name disabled persons, with the aim of enhancing the dignity of disabled people. Despite the debates around this theme (some resist against the differentiation between "non-disabled" and "disabled"), I prefer the term "apparently able-bodied persons and "persons with disabilities". I argue that this term opens our eyes to value the wide variety of God's creatures, including people with disability; and that it shows honour and respect toward human beings. When this term is used by the church, it involves the inclusion and active participation of people with disabilities in the spiritual and social life of the church and the society. In other words, it restores the human dignity. This will be my focus in my two Bible studies that I will be conducting in this conference.

The mission of church is, in reality, a continuation of Christ's mission on the earth, to bring the Gospel to the poor, to set those who are prisoners free: free in their minds, in their physical and spiritual abilities to see the light of their liberation (John 14, 12; Luke 4, 16-19).

I believe that our time of sharing and re-reading the Bible in the context of the "Differently able body" will shape our understanding and value the difference and diversity as part of the richness of Christ's body.

Bible study on 2 Samuel 9, 1-12

In reading the text of 2 Samuel 9, 1-12, we can begin by asking, “**What is this text about?**” Many answers could flow like, “David’s kindness”, “David’s charity to Saul’s house”, “The succession to the throne of David”, “The rise of Mephibosheth through David” and so on. However, under the theme of our conference, the text can be understood to be about “Honour given to Mephibosheth by David”.

The text talks about David, who was looking to any survivors of the house of Saul so that he could show support in the accomplishment of their alliance with Jonathan (1 Samuel 20, 12-18). In v. 1 “David said, “Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” (English Standard Version). Here, David’s demand was not selective, nor malicious. The account of David shows that he was conscious of the fact that he came from the margins to the centre of power (Walter Brueggemann, 1985, 41). This means that David did not forget where he came from and how he was brought up (some people have short memories and when they are in power, they forget everything, even their background).

In the response of David, Ziba, the House of Saul’s servant, said to the King, in v.3 “there is still a son of Jonathan, he is crippled in his feet”. Ziba’s presentation of Mephibosheth to David, highlights “that by his immediate mention of Meribbaal’s lameness he wishes to represent him as harmless. Similarly, his answers to David are extremely terse. Ziba’s later attitude towards his master is somewhat different” (16, 1-4; 19, 27-30) (Hans Wilhem Hertzberg, 1964, 300).

The second question is “**How do we explain the Ziba’s attitude (in reference to 2 Samuel 16 cited above) to Mephibosheth?**” This question leads us to understand the significance of the name of “Mephibosheth”, which meant, “humiliated” or “shamed” (Jeremy Schipper 2006, 35). He was Jonathan’s son and was named Merib-baal. He was five years old when Jonathan was killed; and he became crippled in an accident after news of Saul’s death reached the city. Some scholars state that, in 2 Samuel 21, 1-14 his name “Merib-baal” is used as he escaped execution because of David’s love for Jonathan. Indeed, because of his physical condition, a “cripple”, he could not take part in religious services (see Leviticus 21, 16-34) nor in military functions (Shalom Brooks, 2005, 880-881).

This indicates that to name a child (or a person) can influence his whole life. “There is power in language. Language is regularly a colonizing agent, a tool of subjugation...” (Will Gafney, 2010, 45-46). When I got sick, I was named “diakabi” (in my mother tongue this means “bad luck”) because at that time children who had polio usually died. So, family members and friends were felt sad to see me. And this influenced my life and developed a self-hate until I was a teenager. This is due to the misconception of “disability”. Samuel Kabue argues,

that it remains the case in many parts of the world, “that disability is something that people are ashamed of. It is seen as a condition that should be kept out of sight, something that many people do not want to hear of. Disabilities are stigmatized in different respects...”

In Africa, disability is regarded as a tragedy requiring sympathy and charity, but also sometimes condemnation. Cultural beliefs portrayed disability as a curse, as bad luck brought by the devil as a consequence of sin. In some countries, a woman who delivers a baby with cerebral palsy will be judged to have committed an offence toward an ancestor, toward God, or to have been unfaithful to her husband.

Referring back to Ziba’s attitude, this indicates clearly that due to his physical condition, Ziba thought that Mephibosheth did not deserve to be chosen by King David.

The third question is, “**What was the response of Mephibosheth to David’s offer?**” V. 8 reads, “And he (Mephibosheth) paid homage and said, ‘what is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?’” Here, Mephibosheth, discriminates against himself because, this “dead dog” was what the society (family, friends, church members) saw in him. In other words, the Mephibosheth’s response and attitude reflected the society’s view on a person with a disability.

In referring to Leviticus 21 cited above, in the Jews’ religious sphere any person who had a “blemish”, meaning a “handicap”, or “disability”, or “any incurable disease” was considered as “impure”. They could not approach the sanctuary and no access to the temple. This explains Mephibosheth's response in sense that he was alienated by this mainstream conception.

In Africa, it is recognized that a baby has an innocent and pure spirit, and that if something bad happens to him, this would be the parents’ faults. Mostly in Africa, the woman or mother is blamed and condemned. She may

be accused of having sexual relations with other men or she might have mocked a disabled person.

In some cases a mother will point the finger at her sister-in-law, as is the case in Kasai culture where the “aunties” on the husband’s side are seen as the most dangerous “witches” in the family, because they have no mercy. This indicates how traditional beliefs can be very unfair and how, despite the fact that a woman has carried the new life for 9 months, she is the one who is accused of bringing a curse in the family if something goes wrong.

If the parents (or the mother) are cleared of responsibility, the family will consult a person who can pinpoint a “witch”. If a “witch” is now found the disability is declared a religious case and people would say that “Maybe God allowed this to happen so that we will be more devoted to him”.

In some cases, disability would be interpreted as a “choc en retour” (payback). They might say that a disabled person is “revenant” (a ghost), meaning that he/she had died but was chased back by the ancestors or by God to come and pay back for the faults he or she had committed in his or her life. In order to do so, he or she is born or had become disabled.

This is why even though a person with a disability is admitted to take part in society (I mean work or study), his or her condition remains a challenge and raises questions. For example, people with disabilities are stopped on the market, in shops or public places, and asked “What happened to your leg?” Or “what happened to your life?” And when you don’t give a complete response, they will say: “Pray for God to forgive you” or “Behave properly and nature will heal you”. This shows that the concept of disability in general and specifically in Africa, is shaped by the socio-cultural environment that is defined by myths and legends and this in turn affects the life and families of with people with disabilities.

The last question is, "**How do we compare David's attitude towards the disabled person to the church's (or society's) view?**" V. 9-10 reads, "...But Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall always eat at my table". David honours Mephibosheth, David values Mephibosheth's personality, despite his physical impairment. I will not say, "David not see the disabled Mephibosheth"; rather David sees Mephibosheth as a "different able-body", meaning, a different person with abilities. To the contrary of Ziba who thought that this kind of person cannot do anything in their lives (I leave out this part, which raises issues about the church's activities, because I will develop this in the next session of a Bible Study on Acts 3, 1-10).

However, the point I would rise in this passage is the honour and dignity that

David gives to Mephibosheth. This explains how people with disabilities struggle for their dignity, often exchanging this dignity with pity and exploitation. Therefore, David's invitation to Mephibosheth to eat at this table, is to give people with disabilities opportunities to exploit their capacities and talents in order to realize their independence and their worth, based on their particular abilities. One scholar says, "persons with disabilities are not simply the victims of nature, but are also often victim of a lack of opportunities". Hence, before being given such opportunities, it would be necessary to challenge the views and attitudes that the society has toward disability. May God bless these words, Amen!

Bible study on Acts 3, 1-10

I have done many Bible studies with church leaders on this passage. I use to ask the first question, "**What is this text about?**" The responses would be 'Healing; - *A crippled beggar*;– *Expectation*;– *The surprise*;– *The work of Peter and John*;– *The unnamed person*; - *Social integration*;– *Inclusion*;– *A new person*; - *Holistic healing, etc.*

In this context, I would say that this text is about "**Welcome to differently able body and sharing resources**". Sometimes, you can welcome people in your house just for formalities (because we are Christians or for pleasing people); or we welcome people because we want to exploit and use them. This text will show us how the man called, "Crippled beggar" was welcome in the temple.

The second question is, "**Who are the main characters of this text and what are their relationship?**" The main characters were Peter and John, the

crippled beggar and those who carried him: these could be parents or friends and the members of the temple. Yet, the last two categories (the crippled beggar and those who carried him) are unnamed as the author of this text focused on the work of Peter and John. The text is called the Acts of the Apostles, placing the focus of this book on these apostles. The anonymity of people with disabilities in the Gospel reveals how people with disabilities were ignored and stereotyped. To name people is sign of identification and recognition in their own home, community or society, but people with disabilities are commonly excluded from such identification and recognition.

The third question is, "**Why does this man sit outside the temple?**" The first reason would be, the socio- historical construction of "temple" in the first century and of the Jewish perception of disability. In attempting to respond to this question, I would argue that, people with disabilities were grouped with the impure gentiles who had to remain outside the temple. And also highlighted that this man was viewed as a sinner and as impure, and for that reason he could not enter the temple. Secondly, He sits outside because he is being used by those who carried him.

Here, link this to the perception that today some NGOs and international organizations, and even some individuals/family members profit from people with disabilities and take advantage of their vulnerability.

Thirdly, He is neither informed nor educated about the importance of being in the temple.

This the lack of education about what entry into the temple implies, but also respect for religious traditions of the Jews. As Freire states, "the content of education is conscientisation" which, in the context of this study, makes the people with disabilities conscious of their condition. And conscientisation is the way forward to liberation and empowerment. When a person knows who he is and whatever his weakness is, he can move on and be capable to stand up on his own.. Here there is need of education as liberation for those who are marginalized. Hence Brueggemann in his article, "The Bible as an educational Resource" poses a main question, "How the Bible can be served in the education?"

The fourth, He sits outside because he is ignorant of who he is"; and that those (family, friends) who carried him are also ignorant in this regard.

This reveals a lack of disability awareness and even a lack of recognition of the individual character of the man himself (rather than just seeing him as a crippled beggar) on both sides: among people with disabilities and among apparently able-bodied people.

The fourth question is, "**Do people notice the disabled man? If yes, how do they see him?**" Of course, people who enters to the temple they do see the man. Yet, some see him as "useless man" as "disabled beggar" (that's why the title of the text is like that). Others, see him with pity, out of religious duty, to give poor people. While, others pass even not ignore the man, Peter and John, showed their compassion, they approach the man and interact with him. Peter and John stopped and shared with him what they had found to be a far more precious thing "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth". The name of Jesus Christ was the focal point that the apostles wanted to raise up and glorify to the men of Israel (Acts 3, 11 - 20).

"Silver and gold" are a temporary help, a short term need. Introducing Jesus into the life of this man was a timeless gift, and an unexpected one.

The words of v. 3, "when he saw Peter and John ...he asked them for money", indicate that this man was taught to beg for money to enable him to buy food at the end of the day. He could do nothing to support himself except begging. He was helpless from the moment he was born, and he was shaped by put the mindset that PWDs cannot go anywhere or do anything without external help, since all his life he had to rely on someone. This leads to an understanding of why this man did not ask to be healed. He likely certainly knew of the Apostles' healing miracles but he did not ask to be healed – he asked for money instead. The temporary help (money) was preferred over the permanent help (healing), revealing the "Lame Beggar's" hopeless acceptance of this situation.

The fifth question is, "**What are the normal ways in which we respond to people with disabilities and how does this text challenge us to respond differently?**" The verses 6-9, The words "rise up and walk" (ESV) are an order, a command to change position, to upgrade his condition. The "Lame Beggar" was always seated outside the temple, unable to walk. So, these words were aimed at transforming the situation of this man.

The act of “taking him by the right hand” and the way they “helped him up”(NIV) link with Peter and John’s command that this man should stand and walk.

The expression “stand up and walk” contrasts with the man who spent a lifetime sitting and being carried, signs of his uselessness and hopelessness. But, when Peter (and John) told him to stand and walk, this gave him a sense of hope, and the strength to restart his life, to be independent and to be free. Hence for this man, before he could receive physical healing, his soul and mind had to be healed.

This approach reveals that PWDs do not need pity, or mercy, but compassionate understanding and opportunities to develop their self-assurance, vocation, possibilities and abilities.

The apostles’ (Peter and John) approach presents a challenge to those who claim that they stand by vulnerable persons. Firstly, Peter and John stopped and approached the place where this man was sitting, meaning that they knew their mission as Jesus’ followers, was to be with the “unwell-being”. Secondly, Peter and John took time to talk with the man. Such dialogue and interaction are evidently important in disability construction in a deeper sense by recognizing PWDs as individuals with needs, aspirations and strengths just like the able-bodied people. Thirdly, they took him by the right hand, which is sign of love, welcome, support, encouragement, and integration. The apostles, “....take sides with the victims of stigma and discrimination against the institutions and their leaders who promulgate stigmatization and discrimination forms of theology”.

It is my strong believe that the MCSA Synod, would be the better place to welcome differently able body and share with them the real resources.

May God bless His words to us, Amen!