

The God who notices - St Mary's, Aug 21 2016

I've not been an avid follower of the Olympics this year, but even I am aware of certain names – Adam Peaty, Andy Murray, Mo Farah, Jessica Ennis and Simone Biles. These people are household names! But do you know which sport these people competed in – Sarah Barrow (diving) and Dominic King (50km walking)? These were less noticed members of team GB. When I go into shops, I see signs that proclaim that I am part of team GB. If I am, I am one of these overlooked ones.

In the Gospel reading today, we hear about a woman who is used to being overlooked. She has been bent double for 18 years. Last week, I tried walking like this for a while and I discovered this:

- It was very easy to walk under low branches
- Which was good because it was very difficult to see low branches
- The most obvious thing to see was my toes.
- There was a lot of strain on my neck
- Especially if I had to look forwards
- It was difficult to drink or do basic chores.
- In fact, I struggled to last 18 minutes in this position.

I've not had to deal with long term illness or disability, and I know that some of you will have more experience than I do with this, but my sister has been profoundly deaf since birth and I have seen her struggles. Many of her problems are not due directly to being deaf, but with how other people treat her. This woman in the gospel would have been small and slow, and I suspect she was often left behind and overlooked.

Nevertheless, she went to the synagogue that day. Why? We don't know. It may have been her regular habit. It may be that she had heard about Jesus and wanted to hear him. Maybe she hoped for healing. The Bible does not say. But this small, ignored, overlooked woman went to the synagogue... and Jesus noticed her. Jesus called her forwards, and laid hands on her, and she stands up straight! Imagine that freedom. For the first time in 18 years, she could stretch her back. At last, she had the freedom to look ahead and see where she was going. At last, she could look people in the eye. Maybe – and I'm being a little daring – maybe she had the freedom to lift her hands in praise – because she did praise God. She and the rest of the congregation praised God.

Jesus noticed her when she was limited - the Bible says bound – by disability. But there are other things that bind us. Hunger, insecurity, debt can bind us as well as illness. Internally,

fear, shame, guilt, and bitterness can limit our freedom. We all struggle with at least some of these. Can Jesus help?

As I said, my sister was born profoundly deaf. When she was 8 years old, my mother took her to a church for a healing service. My mother was not a Christian, nor my sister – I was the only Christian in my family at the time. My sister was prayed for, and was not healed of her deafness. But years later, my mother said that from that service, my sister's attitude changed. Instead of resenting being deaf, she started to work with it. Four years later, she represented Great Britain in the Deaf Olympics as one of the youngest competitors. There was healing – just not the same as the woman in the gospel.

If we look wider in the Bible, part of God's purpose is to bring freedom to a world that is bound. Jesus argues this point with the synagogue leader. If we are willing to free an animal on the Sabbath, we should definitely be in the business of freeing people.

Freedom is often not quick or easy, but it is what God does. The OT passage offers some wonderful promises, but they come with a condition – we are called to join God in offering freedom where we can – share our food with the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted, provide homes, and NOT to overlook people those who are struggling. Over the years, the church has responded by setting up schools to give education or sending medical staff to areas of need. More recently, foodbanks are running throughout Birmingham, often from churches. Christians Against Poverty is a charity set up a few years ago to help people budget and get out of debt. This is the work of a God who notices the needy.

Teresa of Avila wrote:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

We cannot do everything – but are we doing anything? Are we working with God to bring freedom to people? Are we noticing people?

There is one other response to this passage – the response that the woman gave, and that is to praise God for what we have received. I noticed that Jesus did not make her life perfect. He did not offer a new house, a pile of money and health forever. This is not Willy Wonka giving her a lifetime supply of chocolate. Instead, he gave her enough to work with. She could now stand up straight, do her daily chores, look people in the face and walk more securely. It was enough, and she praised God.

The psalmist encourages us to do the same: to remember what God has done for us and offer praise. I used to struggle with this – was this good thing from God, or from a person? But

actually it doesn't matter since God is always behind the goodness. I'm sure the woman in the gospel thanked Jesus, but she also praised God.

There is a researcher in America who researches shame and how people handle it. Out of that work, she has written some books about living a full life – a life where we are connected to each other and able to offer our abilities. She is writing from secular research, but she has discovered some guidelines for living this full life. Two of these guidelines are spirituality – being connected to God – and giving thanks. She has discovered this from years of research, but we have a head start, because God has been telling us the same thing for years!

Giving thanks does not always come easily, we need to practise it. We need to take time to remember what we have received and give thanks. I've been trying to do this more over the last few years, and it does make a difference, even when it is hard.

God notices us. He notices our efforts and notices our struggles, and wants to give freedom. God calls us to notice each other – how can we work with God? And God calls us to notice what we receive and give thanks. If life is a marathon and not a sprint, we have plenty of time, and many steps to make.

I don't know if you do this here – but let's stop for a minute now and think quietly. What are you grateful for this week? It may have come directly from God. Or through another person, but what are you grateful for? (Use Bible passages?)

Is there anyone that you should be noticing?