HANDICAPPED PEOPLE AND MINISTRY

By KATE RACKHAM

Is this my sin's reward? O Lord, too much
Too great a sorrow for my strength
Oh, cruel in Thy power if Thou hast made
My child a sacrifice for my offence!
It is not so! Who tell it me blaspheme
And blinder than my own blind child are they;
And blind am I. Lighten O Lord my eyes,
That I may learn Thy love's mysterious way.[1]

'IS HE/SHE ALL RIGHT?' It is readily recognised that at the birth of a baby the mother is often more anxious about its 'normality' than about its sex. The acute distress of parents who find that they have given birth to a handicapped child is nearly always accompanied by a strong sense of guilt.

How far is this guilt due to a long association in people's minds between disease or disability and punishment for sin? One is reminded of the question Jesus's disciples put to him on the occasion of the curing of the man born blind: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' To which Jesus replied, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him' (Jn 9,1-3).

To the handicapped person or to the parents of a handicapped child this might seem a hard saying. What kind of a God is he who sees handicap, against which we instinctively react, as a means of manifesting his works? There is clearly a distortion in understanding of the relationship between what is the consequence of some accident or defect in nature and the care of a loving God. God does not, except in very rare cases of miraculous intervention, interfere with the nature processes causing disability, but he does, with our co-operation, use the state of disablement for the growth in holiness of those affected, both those who are handicapped and those who care for them, and through their holiness his work is indeed made manifest.

It is this positive aspect of handicap which we need to emphasize

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in order to recognize the unique role which handicapped people play in the life of the Church. The question is in fact posed: who ministers to whom?

Leaving aside the element of superstition contained in the handicap-punishment equation, we must examine the psychological basis for the negative attitude towards handicap if we are to understand its significance for growth in maturity and wholeness i.e. holiness. It is perhaps in the word 'wholeness' that the essence of the problem lies, and a preliminary, though clearly over-simplified, statement of what constitutes a 'whole person' is called for.

The human person is a biological entity, relying upon the use of all his or her powers to maintain physical independence and even, in certain circumstances, to survive. But we are also intelligent beings, we have a capacity for feeling and are ultimately spiritual beings. All these are facts of the total personality and at the core of that personality it is the animating spirit which drives us to seek for full development and integration into a unified whole.

While all aspects of personality are simultaneously, and therefore in essence always wholly present, they are not all simultaneously manifested or expressed to the same degree, and it is only slowly in the context of time that each one is brought into consciousness and that integration takes place.

Up to two or two and a half years of age a child is *pre-eminently* occupied with learning about his body; at first simple awareness of hands, feet, etc., and later the more complex bodily functions of crawling, walking, holding, throwing, etc. In other words he is concerned with learning—experientially and not at the level of conscious thought—how to exercise control over the functioning of his physical person. This is essentially also the period of sensory exploration of the immediate physical environment, more particularly by the senses of touch, taste and smell, though at later stages auditory and visual discrimination develop.

At some point, usually between two and a half and three years of age, a child becomes conscious of his separate identity, and from speaking of himself in the third person adopts the first person singular: 'I' becomes part of his experiential vocabulary. Where before he was learning to identify physical objects in relation to himself, now he has to learn to identify and objectify feelings which invade and seem to threaten the newly discovered 'I'. He is a

prey to all kinds of inner sensations: joy, fear, wonder, anger, and his inner life, if it is not to overwhelm him, must be given external expression.

This is the period during which imaginative play develops rapidly. Situations are created which allow outlets for bravery, for anger, for aggression. Where before he tried out physical relationships, now he experiments in personal relationships, provoking reactions, making demands upon people. Intellectual functioning also takes strides forward, but largely at the level of the physical world; the child is intensely practical and full of curiosity about that world. It is still a period of egocentricity; everything is related to himself and he builds all his experiences into the formation of his ego. It is a crucial time for establishing a true personal identity, not just an 'I' in an inimical or sheltering environment, but a person with a capacity for conscious manipulation and control of both the outer environment and the inner turmoil, and for establishing a relationship between the two—the beginnings of integration.

There follows the critical phase of adolescence. Physically and emotionally there is an upsurge and the child who had been increasingly confident of his own ability to be the king in his own country finds himself faced with new challenges at both these levels. If he had had the opportunity to develop a sufficiently strong ego then the point will be reached at which through conscious abstract thought he can assume responsibility for making important choices. The first moment of responsible choice based on his own inner decision is also the moment of self-determination and normally, once this is achieved, his steady growth in responsibility and maturity will be assured, though obviously with many setbacks and obstacles to be overcome from outside and from within himself.

If we accept this as an essential pattern for the normal development of the person then we can see how at risk physically handicapped people can be, since they will often be unable to achieve normal mastery of their bodies. Is it perhaps unconscious recognition of this that provokes such a rejecting attitude towards physical handicap? Is damage to physical integrity seen as a threat to personal integrity? Certainly it is only too common that people with physical handicaps are treated as if they are damaged emotionally and intellectually and as if they are therefore less than people.

The concept of 'mastery' over the physical body is possibly

where the primary error occurs. There must be conscious effort to exercise control over its functioning, but this should be regarded not as acquiring mastery as though 'my body' was something apart from 'me', but as learning to be at home in my body in order to be freer for exploration of the life of the feelings, or the intellect and above all of the spirit. For handicapped people this means learning to be at home in a body which refuses to obey—not just to live *with* it but to live *in* it and through it.

The process of discovering how far the body can in fact be brought to respond to conscious effort at control may be very prolonged and in the meantime the feeling and intellectual aspects of personality will be developing. Each will be brought to bear on this task of learning to be at home in the recalcitrant body, or accepting its limitations. It might even be said that handicapped people will be brought at an earlier stage in life face to face with their emotions, and will be called upon to understand at an intellectual level the challenges which life will present to them.

Deprived of the means of physical expression of their anger, their aggressive instincts as well as of their zest for life, physically handicapped people will have to deal with these internally. Driven upon themselves they will often be forced to explore their inner resources, and, if this is not to result in extreme egocentricity, leading to damaging emotional crises, they can be helped to recognize that at the deeper level of their being God is the source of their life. They will need to draw on all the spiritual resources open to them, including prayer and the sacraments, in order to grow nearer to Christ within them, who will give them strength and courage.

What must not be done is to attempt to bypass the emotional and intellectual responses to handicap, and to expect handicapped people to live at a disembodied 'spiritual' level:

> Until the soul is completely organised and independent it cannot hold its experience together without the help of its own body and the solid environment of the earth's surface. The significance of this should be deeply pondered by those who imagine that an unorganised soul could make progress in a disembodied state of existence.[2]

What if the handicap is intellectual? Here the effect upon personality development seems even more damaging. In human

terms we see intelligence (the ability to reflect—in the full sense of that word) as what distinguishes the human person from all other species. Small wonder then that there is such a strong reaction to lack of intellectual ability which appears to diminish the person to a sub-human level.

Communication through words is so essential a part of intellectual growth, and so potent in fostering the formation of human relationships, that, deprived of this in relating to mentally-handicapped people, many are unable to move out towards them. Verbal expression of our feelings helps us in our attempts to control inappropriate emotional reactions. Mentally-handicapped people lack this intellectually inhibiting mechanism and feelings predominate. It is so often the uninhibited expression of their feelings which renders them frightening to others who may well be afraid of the depth and strength of their own emotions.

Yet it is precisely on this capacity for feeling that we can lean in fostering the development of mentally-handicapped people. Love and affection evoke a response in them. While sometimes not intellectually understanding right and wrong, they are responsive to facial expression or bodily gesture expressing approval or disapproval. They sense when they have somehow damaged a loving relationship and express regret by dejection or a physical approach to the injured person. By a physical response, a smile, a hug, there is for both an experience of reconciliation—a 'sacramental' experience.

Logically the problem of emotional handicap should be considered, as it is at this level of personality that handicap can be the most damaging, and as an isolated handicap (that is, not in conjunction with some other handicapping condition) it is probably the least understood and the most neglected. But the subject is a vast one, and would need a much more penetrating study. Perhaps precisely because it can be so damaging, it is the level at which real ministry can enter into the relationship between handicapped and non-handicapped people, as I have indicated in what I have said about the responsiveness of mentally-handicapped people to a positive emotional approach. We can minister to the bodily needs of those who are handicapped, but we must also be sensitive to the feelings of indignity and invasion of privacy so often present in those dependent upon others for help with the most intimate physical functions. We can minister to their intellectual needs, providing them with stimuli, encouraging them to develop all their

intellectual potential and to pursue adventures of the mind and some compensation for their inability to engage in physical exploits. But, like their bodies, their thoughts are their own. 'You may give them love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts'.[3] At the spiritual level there will be our prayer for and with them, our sharing in the Church's liturgy as an expression of our unity in Christ, and of our shared humanity and equal need of grace. But all of us, whether severely physically handicapped or not, need time to be alone with our bodies, our thoughts and our feelings, in order to achieve through reflections and intensely personal prayer some unity between them, and to become increasingly ourselves.

Nevertheless, we can only fully find and become ourselves through our relationships with others, and ultimately through our relationship with them in God, a relationship of love, since God *is* love. The essence of true relationship is reciprocity, and it is at this point that the question arises: who ministers to whom? It is easy for non-handicapped people to adopt an attitude of superiority, to assume that they are the ones to minister. But the mission to minister to the Christ in others is given equally to the handicapped as to the non-handicapped.

How can handicapped people exercise their ministry? There is a sense in which their immediate ministry is indirect. Their presence among us reveals to us our vulnerability and our state of dependence. We are not the creators of our own destiny but creatures dependent upon our Creator who gives us life and lovingly maintains us in being. Many of us find acceptance of dependence extremely difficult, and it is perhaps the hardest lesson a person has to learn—that he is not 'the master of [his] fate, the captain of [his] soul'.

Handicapped people are forced into a situation of dependence and they too rebel against it. Slowly they come to accept it and in this acceptance they minister to the need of the carers to give of their love and caring, and there is mutual growth in love. Their acceptance of their physical limitations frees them to develop other qualities. They respond positively to the challenges of life, and, taking nothing for granted, rejoice in their achievements and welcome with delight all the good things that life offers them, little as well as big.

Let us make no mistake, there is nothing intrinsically ennobling about handicap. If handicapped people develop qualities and

strengths that call forth our admiration, they have done so at great cost, and probably with many falls along the way. This is movingly expressed in a prayer written by a severely disabled spastic woman:

> Through the gentleness of others you have let your Holy Spirit teach me to realize that if I want to be accepted into society, in spite of my disability, I shall have to learn to grow up and mature. The process of maturity goes on throughout one's life. Please give me the strength and courage to be able to accept help in this way, and not to become hurt and angry when others are trying to guide me along your path. Whether one is disabled or not, we all have to be guided and helped on to the right path, but sometimes, you know without my telling you, when you are disabled the process seems that much longer.[4]

To be handicapped does not diminish liability to sin and there is great need of a full sacramental life, to be nourished by the eucharist, to be healed and forgiven through the sacrament of reconciliation.

It is less obvious why it is through mentally-handicapped people that many carers find growth in love and understanding. Verbal communication with them being limited, we have to find another language. It is mainly the language of touch, of gesture and of facial expression; in other words, we interpret and express our thoughts and feelings through our bodies in different ways, and this becomes a more total giving of ourselves. Understanding this language, mentally-handicapped people respond in their totality and in all simplicity. Their degree of perception can be seen in the way in which they can be led to participate in miming gospel stories, expressing their essence and in a living way ministering the Word to us. To share in a Mass with mentally-handicapped people can be a deeply prayerful experience. The joy and reverence which they reveal in their response is often a contrast to the fidgety restlessness or distracted boredom sometimes to be observed in 'normal' members of a congregation. Who, one wonders, are the spiritually handicapped in need of ministry?

What then can we say of the role of handicapped people in the Church? Firstly, by their presence they remind us of our creatureliness, of our dependence upon God for the gift of life, and of our need for the constant gift of his grace. Secondly, they show us that acceptance of dependence can lead to a freedom of

spirit which enables us to be more fully our human God-given selves, to be what God wants us to be. Thirdly, they teach us that to give ourselves in genuine love not only brings a return of love, but opens us still further to the Spirit of Love; and openness to love is the way to wholeness, to holiness.

Another word might be added about handicapped people in the Church. What about those so severely physically and mentally handicapped as to be unable to make any observable response? They call upon us to make a supreme act of faith. In them we have to learn to recognize the crucified Christ nailed helplessly to the cross by love, and to minister lovingly to him hidden from our eyes in his helpless members.

Thus handicapped people help us to grow in faith and in love and so to build up the body of Christ. How much poorer the Church would be without her handicapped members, through whom indeed 'the works of God are made manifest'.

NOTES

[1] Capel-Cure, E.: Libretto for Elgar's *Light of life*.
[2] Bennet, J. G.: *The dramatic universe*, vol iv (London, 1966), p 24.
[3] Gibran, Kahlil: *The prophet* (London, 1926), p 20.
[4] Greeley, Elizabeth: *Disabled but I trust* (privately printed, London, 1984) p 16.