

Disability theology

The Revd Bill Braviner

Audio file

[Bill audio.mp3](#)

Transcript

00:00:07

Now last, but by no means least is a colleague of mine called Bill Bravana. Bill is a priest up in the grim north.

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He won't mind me saying that the very grim north is called up there and I won't try and do his accent, but because it would just sound terrible and bill and I first met.

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I think it's about eight years ago in a pub in Harrogate.

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You can tell I've moved South. I called it Harrogate with a H. Not arrogant without the age and we were talking together about a lack of decent disability theology written by disabled theologians and not just about disabled people. And from that conversation with others disability and Jesus.

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Sort of grew and took on its own form. So Bill, I'm really pleased that you're here to join us and to just explore a bit more about what it means for disability and theology to come together. Disability and Jesus to come together literally, and and what that all means so.

00:01:08

To you.

00:01:08

Thanks Katie, I'm well impressed that you talked about serving the best to last and it made me feel like a like a fine wine.

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So let's just hope that when we uncork the bottle, we don't find that it has actually corked UM. The title I've I've put on the slide there all made in God's.

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Image really is the essence.

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Of my theology of disability, the fact that we are all made in God's image and that we are not factory seconds we are.

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Or not, imperfect impressions of God image where somehow God got something wrong and sort of looked at us and said oops, you know messed up, try to do better next time.

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No, we are made fearfully and wonderfully in God's image, and we have to find a way in our theology and our ecclesiology.

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To bring about an inclusion of that diversity of people, it's one of the diversity among many that we need to really work on to include properly in the life of the church. So that's really the starting point that we're all made in God's image.

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But of course quite often church as well, but society tends not to include as well as it could. Society tends to push people to the margins if they're a bit different, that's the that's the story of history, and it's certainly something that happens.

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Quite off.

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And often that's a literal pushing to the margins. How many of us have been somewhere to go to the main entrance and find the little sign that says disabled entrance at rear?

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And of course what they mean is there's a wheelchair ramp at the rear. They don't even get the fact that disability.

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Is a hugely diverse thing in itself.

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But for some, it's OK that if you're a wheelchair user, well, you have to go down that alleyway at the side round beside the bins and you get let in at the back, because that's where we've put the ramp. There is something marginalising in society, and there are all sorts of ways that that happens.

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And we're hopefully getting a bit better at that, but it's certainly still part of daily life for so many disabled people.

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What we want to be, as disabled Christians is Christ like. So I thought that it would be good for us just to begin to take a look at some of the things about Jesus that might help us to think about where he put himself and attributes of his. That might encourage us.

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To see him maybe a little bit more on the margins with us. So as you can see from the slide first of all.

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Jesus was located very much on the margins, even before the bullet points that I've put on this screen, his incarnation began with an unmarried mother. His incarnation began in an air of potential scandal, but certainly his birth happened outside the community.

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In a place where animals were shepherds were possibly, or at the very least it was down in the place.

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In the in the House where they were staying, where the animals lived, it was away from normal society. It was on the edge.

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And his his birth in that place to that unmarried mother in that place which was ritually unclean rendered Jesus marginalised even from before his birth.

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But very soon after, because of the power dynamics of the day and the politics of the day, he found himself.

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A refugee at a very early age and so was physically marginalised, had to leave for another country to seek safety.

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And of course there's a whole other conversation we could have.

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About what that means for asylum seekers and refugees and the work we do with them. But if we go on to the next slide, we can see that that carried on.

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Through his life in Nazareth. Well, first of all he was.

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Marginalised by being up in the north. Of course gods own country and where everybody should want to be. The further north the better.

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Sometimes we certainly need to be, you know, further north than the the the boundary between the Canterbury and York provinces. I I'm convinced of that, but I'll take my tongue out with my cheek and just say.

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Jesus lived his life his first 30 years of life in a fairly obscure out of the way place, and he lived a life about which we don't hear very much and friends and neighbours don't seem to have spotted very much different about him.

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It was, it was the kind of place where Nathaniel, one of his disciples, could say when first heard about Jesus.

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Can anything good come from Nazareth? This wasn't the centre of things. He wasn't living in the most upmarket happening place in Jerusalem. He was on the Borderlands. He was on the edges of Gentile territory.

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The edges of accessible.

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Quality of acceptability? Sorry so if we move on to the next slide we can see that as he moved into ministry, not only did he come from the margins but he chose the margins.

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He lived an itinerant ministry, homeless, the son of man, has nowhere to lay his head relyant on other people relyant.

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Often on the women who followed him as disciples to provide for him out of their resources, at which in the in its day was incredibly countercultural and incredibly marginalising.

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He spent much of his time in Galilee, full of gentiles across the sea, across the Sea of Galilee, in Gentile territory. He spent much of his time interacting with people who were beyond marginalised, beyond the Pale of Judaism.

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And even when he was in the centre of things at the Temple in Jerusalem, he would place himself in the outer court in Solomon's portico often, but in a place where anybody could be not in a place where there was any exclusion of gentiles of women of anyone.

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And those were the places along with places like the Pulav, Beth Sathre, and other places like that that Jesus went where you could often find people who we might refer to as disabled people with things that that were limiting how much they could participate and how much they could interact. That's where Jesus chose to be.

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And those were the people with whom Jesus chose to spend his.

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Time Zero moving to the next slide. We can think about some of them. We can think about. The disciples are, I told bunch of people.

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Tax collectors, fishermen. Not the kind of people. If you were building a multinational global organisation that you would pick to have on your board of directors but Jesus did Jesus chose Mary.
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Magdalene, who whatever the truth about her background and who she was, seems to have been very much a marginalised character, chose her to be the first witness of the resurrection. The apostle to the apostles, the woman from whom church stems in a very real sense.

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Jesus interacted so much with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. His friends, who were a very precarious household, probably a young group of brothers and sisters who at any moment could find themselves without any security at all. And when Lazarus died, that was what was about to happen again. A whole other sermon.

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But Jesus focus that seems never to have been on the in crowd. It seems always to have been on the people at the edge when Jesus was reclining at the House of Simon the Pharisee, and they're all there with their heads towards the table, resting on their cushions and their feet poking out towards the edges where the public could come in and watch.

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It was the woman who came and anointed his feet with precious ointment, who became the centre of attention. The one who came from the margin and was still very much at the margin who became the centre of attention, not the great and the good who were at the table or hosting that.

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They were the ones who had to challenge Jesus because they didn't like what he was saying.

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But the out crowd, as opposed to the in crowd, the marginalised people, as opposed to the ones at the centre.

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They were the ones who were drawn to a response of love because they understood what it was to be excluded and unloved.

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So moving on to the next slide, we see that in his teaching Jesus would champion the marginalised look at the qualities of the people in the beatitudes. That's not the rich and the powerful, the great and the good.

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That's the meek, it's the humble. It's the ones who go out of their way to make peace and so on.

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Look at Jesus parables and how often he talks about the person who's being marginalised as the one who reveals the Kingdom of God.

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Look at Jesus encouragement to be like a child, not in the sense of being childish but being as one without power, without status without.

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And in the 1st century Mediterranean world, quite often without any value whatsoever, we're talking about a culture that would happily leave children exposed to the elements if they were unwanted. For them to die.

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Jesus says be like a child. Look at Jesus attitude to woman women which I've alluded to already treated equally, sometimes treated with greater honour than the men because they seemed to get it.

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Who was by the cross? Not Simon Peter, not Andrew, not James, not John, Mary and the other women.

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Look at how Jesus uses women not just to be apostles, but the primary apostles, apostles to the apostles. Mary Magdalene announcing the resurrection to Peter the rock and look at Jesus biased to the poor, always biased to the excluded because he spent.

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His time with and who he got in trouble spending his time with. It was always folks on the margins and as we moved to the next slide we see that what Jesus did all of that time was to bless the margins to restore people who were marginalised to relation.

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Kinship, which is what healings about not cure, not fixing them necessarily, and that might happen, but it might not.

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The paralysed man who was lowered through the roof was healed by being forgiven his sins and only then when people couldn't get that was he cured as assigned to them.

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He was already sorted. Jesus constantly named those on the margins as.

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Not far from.

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The the Kingdom Jesus own crucifixion and resurrection happened at the marginal times of day.

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Dusk and dawn his resurrection appearance is often at the margins between land and sea. Very very significant in Jewish thought, and Jesus was at the margins of being safe in many of his great signs, like calming the storm like walking on the water, mastery over the edges.

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Of life, it was all about being there at the very mark.

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And ultimately, of course, standing in the gap to help us reach the father and bridging that margin.

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So in terms of theology and disability and and what we're called to do and to be as a church and as disabled people, the call is to be Christlike. And so the call must be to locate ourselves at the margin. The call must be to interact.

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Much more intentionally with people at the margin. The call must be not simply to try and give people a leg up into the centre, but to move the centre out to the margin.

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We live marginally between Easter and and the coming of Christ. Again, we need to consciously inhabit a margin. In all we do, we have 1 foot in heaven, 1 foot on Earth, let's bridge that threshold for everybody. So what we must do as?

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People who locate ourselves on the margins is mind. The gap between the way things are and the way things should be between the empire that the world wants to build and the Kingdom that God has built.

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And follow Jesus commands to go and find the Kingdom of God out there in the hedgerows where people are excluded, marginalised and all the rest of it and not bring them in, not fix them, not make them so that they're suitable to be in the centres of power, but remain.

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A church on the edge.

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Because that's where we'll find our life. That's where we'll find our healing, and that's where we'll find ourselves and we'll find ourselves there because that's where Jesus puts himself. That's where Jesus locates his ministry. That's where Jesus says the blessing is to be found.

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And if only people of the margin can fulfil the call of God, then that means the church has an enormous amount to live.

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From those of us who are disabled and from those who are marginalised for all sorts of other reasons, and we need to own what it is that helps us to understand the margin, the edginess of the Kingdom of God and help the rest of the church to find its way there to where we.

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Hopefully spend our time.

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Thank you.

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Well, thank you so much. You know that you and I've had these conversations for long time and it's great to be able to to kind of close our time together with those thoughts. Umbil, can I ask you a question which is about.

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You know how do I phrase this so you're in the unusual position of both having a disability in terms of mental health and your own journey with that?

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And wearing a dog collar which is a symbol of a structure that doesn't necessarily understand. So how do you square that circle? How do you occupy?

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Both that marginal place of mental health challenges and that public space of the perfect priest. I'm not saying you're perfect, but this just says the dog collar means were perfect, right?

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So I took mine off today and trying to trying to hold them in tension and and how does one boy.

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I mean the mental health change, the other, by which I mean the structure.

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I, I think you you inadvertently used the word that I would use to describe my approach. You said how do I hold those intention and intention as one word is exactly what it's about. For me, it's about being absolutely open and transparent about the mental health issues that I live with.

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It's about, you know, not ramming that down people's throats as it like one of those people who tries to evangelise by waving a big Bible at people and telling them godheads their sins.

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So would the police come and love him? It's about saying to people look, this is not something I'm hiding away.

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This is not something that I'm ashamed of. This is not something that I need to get past in order to be a proper priest.

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This is something that actually enables my priesthood, and if I think back to the let's think how many years it was now it was about.

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10 or 12 years that I was a priest before I had this period of mental health difficulty and this you know what many people would call a breakdown, but it was. It was more than.

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That it was.

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It was kind of deeper than just a word.

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But when I think about the the the 10 or 12 years I've ministered since I had that particular period of and I've been living with those issues ever since.

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My understanding of of my faith, of my ministry, of other people.

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Of my my interaction with other people and and so many other things is it's not just different, it's so much deeper.

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Because in a way that experience which people refer to as breakdown was actually a God putting me right. It was a it was a healing experience.

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It was painful I I wouldn't particularly fancy going through those couple of years again. If you know if you're offering me the red pill in the blue.

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Uhm, I I wouldn't not have gone through it, but I wouldn't take the whichever pill it is. Again, you know.

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It was a difficult time, but.

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My understanding of who I am and who's I am and who God is.

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Is so much richer.

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For having addressed and lived through and worked through the things that that experience revealed to me and so for me.

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Now it's part of my calling to be able to share that with people first of all.

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To say if you have mental health difficulties, you're not somehow a factory. Second, you're not somehow going to be rejected from God.

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Production line and we don't just want rid of you to keep you quiet thankfully, so even societies got past the.

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But also that there's so much in this that we can all learn together and and discover together, uhm?

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That that actually you know, pushing it away would be entirely the wrong thing to do.

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And in actual fact him embracing our mental health difficulties properly.

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He means quite often that we do that, journeying at a much earlier stage in the process of having those difficulties, which means they don't manifest themselves quite as deeply as they might otherwise do.

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And that's that's part of my approach to life now and why I haven't had another bad episode. You know, for quite some time, but but it is.

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About that sense of.

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This being about.

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Cross and resurrection.

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You know this crucifixion.

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That I that I kind of went through and lived with is so intimately tied to a resurrection, a dawning of the Kingdom and a dawning of understanding that I have to talk about that with people. And the more we talk about it.

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Better sorry, I'm I'm going on, I do that. Sorry it's a. It's a preachers nightmare. You can't answer a question without preaching a sermon. I'm sorry about that.

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That's why I'm hosting and not speaking, so I can be contained. And do you think, briefly that there's hope for the Church of England system that it can actually begin to flex itself a little bit to to understand better and be the question Jesus asks, how can I help and and how can I?

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Be of assistance to you? Or do you think the structure is too deeply embedded for it to change?

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No, I I don't nothing beyond redemption ever ever, but I really do think there's so much.

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Willingness now in the church at. You know from everybody I'm I'm not just talking about bishops and General Synod and all the rest of it.

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I think the understanding generally in the church is much, much better and much clearer about the need for us to address these things, but in the mix with everything that's been going on.

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About safeguarding everything that you know we're talking about with other kinds of diversity like race, like gender and all the rest.

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But I think there's a mood in the church now that says.

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That we kind of understand that God's trying to teach us something about the kind of people that he's trying to make us as citizens of the Kingdom.

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And God doesn't accept us as members of the Church of England so much as citizens of the Kingdom. And that whole sense of what that means and how we.

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Embody the Kingdom as a church.

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I really do feel there's a willingness for that conversation and a willingness to engage with the answer, so I'm incredibly hopeful. I'm incredibly hopeful.

00:22:01

Good, I'm glad you are friends. You can get in touch with Billy's on Twitter at Bill Bravana. If you look at his name on screen, it'll give you a clue as to how you spell that.

00:22:11

So at Bill Braven on Twitter and also at Disability, J and if you Google disability and Jesus then you'll find more information there. You may see bills face and you may see mine.

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As well as a co-founder of that group, Bill, Thank you for being with us and for closing our time together. Beautifully. Thank you.

00:22:29

It's a joy. Thank you.