

Sermon Michaelmas 2024, St John the Evangelist, Cambridge

by Prof. Tom Shakespeare

'Stairway to Heaven'

Readings: *Genesis 28. 10-17, Hebrews 1. 5-end, and St John 1. 47-end*
+ Hebrews 12.13

This is a month of reunions for me, because it is 40 years since I left school, 40 years since I matriculated at Pembroke College. That's why I am here in Cambridge this weekend, attending my King's reunion yesterday, because it is 35 years since I started my Phd there.

Last week, we had a fine dinner at Pembroke and I met my friend Christine, who was in the same year as me, the first year since 1347 that Pembroke College admitted women.

I reminded her how we went together, almost 40 years ago, to see the film about Led Zeppelin, "The Song Remains the Same", at Selwyn College.

And the most famous song of that rock group is one that most of you will know, "Stairway to heaven". It's about someone who is buying a stairway to heaven.

So hold that in your mind: a stairway to heaven.

And we know from another song that it is "One – two – three steps to heaven". Hold that thought: three steps to heaven.

Today we hear from Genesis about Jacob's ladder, which he dreams is mounting to heaven.

So we have steps...a staircase... and a ladder. Can that be right?

Now, I've been paralysed since 2008, and have used a wheelchair ever since. I am no good on stairways, I haven't climbed a ladder for years, and my steps are a bit doddery. I had a cut on my forehead all week. It is mysterious where it came from. I told people I had been sleep walking, only I can't walk.

But if we have steps, a stairway and a ladder, it sounds as if disabled people are not welcome.

But then we look at Hebrews 12, 13, where we read:

"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

I think that's quite clear. If we make level paths, in other words, provide access, then everyone can participate.

It is true for schools and colleges, it is true for workspaces, and it is true for everywhere we might want to go in public life.

For me, “level paths” refers to all the ways in which we can enable people. It might mean ramps, elevators, signage, accessible bathrooms, all of it.

Now, does Jesus want disabled people to participate? Of course he does. Because disabled people are people first. They are not a separate species, or a type of alien.

And by disabled people, I mean people with physical impairments, deafness, blindness, intellectual disabilities and mental health conditions, including dementia,

I know in many places Jesus cures people with all sorts of mental and physical impairments. But I do not think we should today be trying to cure people. I don't think we are called to cast our devils or look for miracles.

Because I think we are not looking for a cure like that. To be embodied is to have limitations of body or mind. Everyone. Eventually we die. Everyone.

Medicine can help remedy our afflictions and delay death, up to a point. But we should be accepting people and praying that we might all find ways of accepting our limitations and putting them to good use.

After all, the Psalmist tells us, in Psalm 139 v 14:

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

We read also in the previous verse:

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.”

So God knows us and love us and accepts us.

And so in turn does Jesus in the Gospels. Remember the parable of the great feast in Luke 14 v.15:

“A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

But they all made excuses and said they were busy. So the master tells his servant:

‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

In other words, we are all welcome at God's banquet. All we have to do is hear and respond to the call.

The week before Pembroke's fortieth anniversary banquet, I went to a lunch at my old school, to mark 40 years since we left there. Now when I was at school, the Chaplain was Michael Jenkins, may he rest in peace, and I still remember back then him explaining to me that the word "religion" was derived from the Latin "religare" meaning "to bind". Through religion, we are linked to God and to each other.

These bonds which bind us to one another are particularly important when or if we are disabled. Because if there was ever a human phenomenon which shows we need each other, it is disability. We need family, we need neighbours, we need supporters and often when need carers. I need others to change my lightbulbs, to fix my wheelchair, sometimes to push me in my chair. I want to be as independent as possible, but I need others from time to time. In fact, we all need others from time to time.

Let us turn back to what has so beautifully been read to us today.

In the Old Testament reading, we heard the famous story of Jacob's ladder. And I said I hoped, rather than a ladder which I cannot scale, to have an elevator or lift. I think I am allowed that. After all, it is symbolism, and it reflects its time.

And in the Gospel, we heard about Jesus predicting that the angels of God would be seen mounting up and down that ladder.

Let me finish by telling you one more story. I do not give sermons very often. Maybe once or twice a year in my church of St Anselm's. And my mother always gives suggestions. She is very active in her church. So she will look for the readings in her annotated Bible and give me ideas. A few months ago, I was visiting and I gave her the readings for this week and she found the place in her Bible.

"I don't think it will be any help," I said, but she said I should have a look, so I did. And do you know what it said?

Jesus is the ladder. Jesus is the ladder. Jesus connects us, disabled and nondisabled, to God. Put another way, Jesus is the elevator to Heaven. Not such a good song, but much more true. Jesus is our link. Jesus is the access to our Heavenly Home.

I think that's the message I want you to take home. Jesus is the way up and the way in, and that goes for everyone, whether or not we have disabilities.

We are all equally welcome, because Jesus came for us all. *Amen.*