

Learning to Care

East Window, April 1998

I have never been able to forget a Radio broadcast I heard many years ago. The speaker was wheelchair-bound and was asked what wish he would most like fulfilled. I had expected to hear him ask for release from his chair, but instead he suggested how good it would be if all his listeners could be wheelchair-bound themselves for a month.

"I suppose," suggested the interviewer, "that would alert us all to the great problems of disability." "Oh no, that's not the point," he replied, "it is simply that all would thereby gain the wisdom that comes from having to treasure the very simple and basic things of life. It would help us all become more human."

St Paul underwent so many trials and tribulations in his ministry, but at one point he lets it drop in his letters that he has to contend with what he called his 'thorn in his flesh'. None of us will ever know precisely what his ailment or difficulty was. But there are many who, like Paul, have to live their life with a nagging disability or difficulty.

In our better moments we can, like that wheelchair-bound broadcaster, let our own disability open us up to deeper gifts and greater treasures. Sometimes God has a way of doing this which passes all our understanding and makes life richer and deeper for all concerned. Like St Paul, the disability helps us become aware of just how much we always rely on God, and not on our own strengths and gifts. We become brighter and wiser human beings.

And yet, for the many, disability remains a burden all too great to bear, especially when its weight is added to by discrimination, lack of mobility or social exclusion. Our National Government has spoken of 'social exclusion' as a prime evil, and we trust that new legislation will guard those with disability so that they may always know themselves to be important and valued members of the wider society.

When Vicki and I were young students we were pleased to be introduced to Mrs Joan Brander who had founded an organisation called the Winged Fellowship. It enabled Vicki and I to spend a few weeks as volunteers living alongside people with profound disability. We helped push wheelchairs, went with them on outings, learnt the basics of nursing, we entertained and were entertained in turn. And above all, we learnt so very much about how, amidst adversity, some become such full and rich human beings.

After so many years, I was honoured and delighted this month to meet Mrs Joan Brander once again when she came to visit. For her work continues, volunteers are still needed and financial support always necessary. She now has many holiday homes across the country where subsidised breaks are available to those who need special care. Why not give a hand? Please give whatever you can. Pray for the good work of the Winged Fellowship and volunteer to help at one of the local holiday homes. Our closest home would love to hear from you: It's at Jubilee Lodge, Grange farm, High Road, Chigwell, Essex, IG7 6DP. Or why not call for details on 0171 833 4579

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