A few questions...

- Think about your own ministry and mission. What are some of the broken things, that you can’t fix? If there are no broken things - why do you think this is?

- How do the broken things effect you? In what ways – frustration, disappointment, anger, apathy, distance, etc?

- Why is our world so quick to ‘reject’ or ‘fix’ things that are broken?

- Is there something that God might be asking you to accept?

- In what ways might your weakness become a strength?

- How might acceptance of your brokenness/weakness enhance you and your ministry?

- In what ways might this bring glory to God?

- What actions do you need to take because of this session?

- Think of a gospel story that might speak into your situation.

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Valuing the Broken

*Accepting ministry weakness as strength*

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Conversation with James

Session 1

*Charles Hewlett*
Enjoy the Broken
James and Charles Hewlett

Well James, you really are broken, aren’t you? I remember that little rhyme I’d say when I was a boy... “When God passed out brains, I thought he said trains, and I missed mine.” Well James, you really did miss yours! We’ve laughed together a lot over the years about this haven’t we? Remember the time you got stuck under the coffee table and couldn’t work out a way to get out – and we just had to laugh. I remember the time we were pushing the trolley around Palmer’s Garden Nursery together and I wondered why you were moving so slow – I thought you must have been tired. After a while I looked to see that both your trousers and your nappies had come down and they were caught around your ankles. James you were walking around the garden centre in the starkers! We joked all the way home about how those pretty young assistants were taking more notice of us than usual!

Son, I like things that are broken, that can’t be fixed; things like you. Ha, we seem to live in a world that is very preoccupied with things being just right, and we struggle to cope with things that are somehow flawed. I get sick of being the leader who has to fix things all the time. There’s so much pressure:

· “What are we going to do about this Charles?”
· “What ideas have you got to make us more successful?”
· “Present your solution to us at the next Board meeting.” And if I can’t fix it, then maybe I’m a lousy leader.

I love the fact that you are broken and I don’t have to fix you. There is noting that can be done about your disability and I have to accept it.

Each time I mentioned my son James, Mandy would interrupt me: “James. I know a James. But I don’t know your James. James, I know a James.” As I finished I returned to my seat. I sat down wondering if this had really been effective use of my time.

The staff invited me to stay for lunch. I purposely looked for Mandy and decided to sit next to her. She aggressively shook my hand and continued to apologise, “Sorry, but I don’t know your James. I know a James. But I don’t know your James.”

I decided to ask her about her James. “Who is your James?” I asked. “How do you know him?”

“From my day programme in West Harbour,” she replied.

“Oh,” I said, “What’s the name of it?”

“Agape,” she responded.

“You do know my James!” I exclaimed with excitement. “My James is your James!”

Mandy grabbed my hand. “Oh, we love your James,” she told me. “He’s beautiful. We love your James.” She then went on to tell me how she enjoyed helping him out: “We read to him. He loves ‘Five Little Ducks’. Oh, I love your James.”

Tears came to my eyes - I couldn’t help it. Just 15 minutes earlier I had been questioning the value of Mandy, and nurturing the gifts that God had given to her – gifts she used to help my very own son.

- How might acceptance of your brokenness/weakness enhance you and your ministry?
- In what ways might this bring glory to God?
Recently I was speaking to a group of profoundly physically and intellectually disabled adults. They were having their weekly discipleship study and I had been invited to come along and speak to them. There were about 30 people in the room and I was talking through Ephesians 4:1-2, “Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.”

I began to talk about my own disabled son James to help illustrate a point. James is 23-years-old with the cognitive ability of a 9-month baby. Suddenly I was interrupted by a disabled woman, standing to my right. Her name was Mandy.

“James,” she called out in a loud voice, “I don’t know your James. I know a James. But I don’t know your James.” Smiling, I waited for Mandy to finish, and began my talk again.

A few sentences later I mentioned James again. “James,” Mandy interrupted me, “I don’t know your James. I know a James – he can’t talk either. I don’t know your James. I know a James but I don’t know your James.”

“Oh dear,” I thought to myself. I had planned to use James as an example in my next point too.

“James,” cries out Mandy, even louder than before, “Sorry I don’t know your James. I know a James. He’s lovely. But I don’t know your James.” I was starting to feel a little frustrated.

“Where are the caregivers?” I thought to myself. “Surely they could help me out a bit here! I mean, I am the Principal of a theological college. I’ve given up valuable time to be here.”

You have made me realise that instead of resenting your brokenness, instead of wishing you were different, I can enjoy you and live in all the richness that your brokenness brings. It is through your disabilities that I have learnt the most about myself, about life, about living, and about God. Thank you for reminding me not to be sucked in by perfection and all of its glossiness and superficiality. You have helped me understand that there might not be a quick fix for that family struggling with marriage issues. You’ve helped me appreciate that there might be value in having that eccentric person as part of our team. You’ve helped me see that it doesn’t matter that the woman with mental health issues keeps interrupting the service.

You have helped me realise that it doesn’t matter that the church foyer is looking a bit tired – in fact it’s quite quirky (apparently it’s retro!). And it doesn’t matter that our worship leader doesn’t look like a model. James, you have helped me to appreciate the ordinary, the different, and to accept things and people the way they are.

- Think about your own ministry and mission. What are some of the broken things, that you can’t fix? If there are no broken things - why do you think this is?

- How do the broken things effect you? In what ways – frustration, disappointment, anger, apathy, distance, etc?
What is normal?
Charles Hewlett

I remember once speaking to a group of young adults with profound intellectual and physical disabilities when we were interrupted by a question, “Would you like to swap your daughter for a normal one?” It was the first time someone had asked us this question and we were both left a little speechless. Would we like to swap Janelle, whose cancer-ridden brain had left her extremely disabled, for a normal daughter?

As I attempted to splutter out my answer I quickly realized this was not a query about me or my daughter. Rather, this was a question about a 22-year-old woman confined to a wheelchair and struggling to live with cerebral palsy. She wanted to hear from me whether she had any value and worth. Could her own parents, let alone others, possibly love her for who she was? Or was she a sub-human whose personhood had been so badly damaged that it needed to be replaced by something more appealing? Something more useful?

While we ended up answering this question with a resounding, “NO!” we were left speculating on where this question had really come from. What was it that caused this beautiful young woman to ask such questions about her existence? What mistaken narratives had she been listening to?

- Why is our world so quick to ‘reject’ or ‘fix’ things that are broken?

As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, ‘I want a blessing too.’ She stood up and, before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her, many more of the handicapped people followed, expressing the same desire to be blessed. The most touching moment, however, came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old student, raised his hand and said, ‘And what about me?’ ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Come.’ He came, and, as we stood before each other, I put my arms around him and said, ‘John, it is so good that you are here. You are God’s Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us. When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love.’ As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and then he said, ‘Thank you, thank you very much.’

What is a blessing?

Henri Nouwen

Not long ago, in my own community, I had a very personal experience of the power of a real blessing. Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community, said to me: ‘Henri, can you give me a blessing?’ I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, however, she protested vehemently, ‘No, that doesn’t work. I want a real blessing!’ I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, ‘Oh, I am sorry, ... let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service.’ She nodded with a smile, and I realised that something special was required of me. After the service, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, I said, ‘Janet has asked me for a special blessing. She feels that she needs that now.’ As I was saying this, I didn’t know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn’t leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, ‘Janet has asked me for a special blessing,’ she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms. Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, ‘Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.’

Strength in Weakness?

The Apostle Paul

7 ...even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. 8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. 9 Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 10 That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:7-10)
The Apostle Paul understood, and valued, brokenness.

In one of his best-known phrases Paul states, “I was given a thorn in my flesh”. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, the word thorn could be translated “stake” or “splinter”. It’s intended to convey an experience of significant discomfort. Paul doesn’t give us the specific details of what it is and there has been plenty of speculation over the years about what the thorn represents.

Some have suggested a type of physical disability. Perhaps a disfigurement or a disease. I’m sure you would have heard all the suggestions: perhaps it was the speech impediment, a hunchback, epilepsy, malaria, maybe even migraines. It seems like Paul suffered from particularly bad eyesight. In Galatians 4 he writes, “If possible you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me”. And in chapter 6 he talks about the “large letters” he used with his own handwriting. Some have suggested the thorn represents spiritual temptations – the urge for Paul to doubt and waiver in his faith when things get hard. Maybe it was sexual temptation - testing Paul’s commitment to remain celibate. Other suggest the thorn refers to his suffering and persecutions, like he records in the previous chapter. Who knows? But whatever the cause of this thorn, it’s sting was severe.

I love the fact that for Paul, this brokenness was something that he learned to embrace, to even value. In verse 9 he says, “I am glad to boast about my weaknesses”. In fact, in verse 10 Paul says, “I take pleasure in my weaknesses”. It’s interesting isn’t it. In verse 8, he pleads three times with the Lord to take this thorn away from him, “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away”. But by verse 9 and 10, he’s glad – he’s boasting and delighting in it.

Why? How? What happened? The thorn definitely wasn’t taken away!

Paul realises that brokenness is the opportunity for the power of God to dwell with him. It’s the Lord’s well-known words of encouragement in verse 8 that makes all the difference for Paul, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” Paul realised that God’s grace was poured into his life, not in spite of the thorn, but because of that weakness. Verse 9 “My power works best in weakness.

Although I knew I couldn’t change the way Janelle was, I found that I couldn’t accept it either. I loved Janelle, but acceptance of her as she was seemed like giving in, like admitting defeat. By not accepting, I could still hope that it was all a bad dream, that I would wake up in the morning and everything would be different. By not accepting, I could allow myself the luxury of wallowing in the “if onlys” and “what ifs”. It took me a long time to realise that by not accepting, I was wasting my thoughts on someone who didn’t actually exist, a dream, someone in my imagination, instead of loving the real Janelle, who needed me so much.

It took me ten years to finally accept the Janelle who really was, instead of wishing for the Janelle who never would be. To accept her fully for the amazing person she was, instead of always wishing she could be different. It sounds so simple, but it was a huge step! To look at Janelle without a sense of injustice, unfairness, sadness hadn’t seemed an option. But the reward for trying to let go of “if only” is the freedom to sit by her bed thinking of how beautiful she is, accepting her, loving her just the way she is, instead of loving her but wishing she were different.

“Night-night, Janelle. I love you.”
Acceptance
Joanne Hewlett

Tucking Janelle in for the night was always my job, but we were both involved in getting her there. In the early days, Charles would carry her under her arms, while I walked backward bearing the lesser weight under her knees. In later years, as she got too heavy and awkward for this, we would use the hoist. Once she was on the bed, I would take over the nightly ritual of changing Janelle’s nappy, putting her pyjamas on and giving her the anti-seizure medication, which she obviously disliked but tolerated with grace. Carefully, I would remove the little clips that held the curls of her fringe in place, and make sure her favourite bedtime toy was within easy reach. As I leaned forward for a kiss, she would pucker up her lips expectantly and, on occasion, put her arm around my shoulder to draw me into a hug. Janelle always enjoyed going to bed. She was very relaxed and at ease in her bed; it was her space. Here, her disabilities weren’t so limiting. Like any other girl, she could stretch out and enjoy the softness of the sheets and the warmth of the blankets.

I would tell her, “Night-night, Mummy loves you,” and then stay a while longer, absentmindedly stroking her hair, watching her play with her toy, thinking. Thinking, “If only...” If only she didn’t have a tumour, if only she could talk, if only she could look at me, if only she could walk, if only... A deep, deep sadness would come over me, and tears that had been kept at bay would often come to the surface.

I couldn’t help but think of the way bedtime should be – the sharing of a book or a prayer, perhaps looking forward to the next day, a special event, or excitement about the day that had been. I couldn’t help but think of the way Janelle should be – a running, laughing, talking girl – and all the things she wasn’t able to enjoy. I missed these things enormously and I grieved for the Janelle who might have been, who should have been.

If Paul had it all together, if he had been wonderfully and miraculously healed, then people might point to his intelligence, or his giftedness, and his devotion as the source of his adequacy. But, rather, because he had physical struggles as well as countless external trails, the success of his ministry can only be attributed to the grace of God.

And, this is why Paul says I’m going to boast about my weaknesses and not my strengths, “so that the power of Christ can work through me”. Verse 10, “That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul recognises that brokenness provides the opportunity for the power of God to dwell with us. Paul understood the fact that “God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong” (1 Cor 1:27).

- Is there something that God might be asking you to accept?
Who Participates?

Charles Hewlett

Who can participate in the Mission of God? Is it the teacher, the doctor, the engineer, or the farmer who has the ability to partner with people at the grassroots level and present relevant life skills? Is it those with a theological education who can persuasively present reasons for their faith? The humanitarian whose practical actions can so visibly demonstrate the love of God? Maybe it’s the imaginative pioneer able to sell and promote their idea to the wealthy donor? Or is it the experienced practitioner able to effect contextualisation?

My answer to this question was significantly challenged when we recently spent time with a profoundly disabled young man living in the violent favelas of Sao Paulo. Gabriel’s personhood, his very existence, realised peace within his borough in ways which were outside the able-bodied paradigm.

We didn’t observe a peace activist delivering an inspiring speech that motivated the masses to transformation. We didn’t watch a bold protestor carrying the big banner at the front of the peace marches. Nor did we witness a skilled lobbyist influencing the local government policy makers to bring about change. Rather, the peace-maker we observed was someone lying in his bed. Dribbling from the mouth. Prone to seizures. Incontinent. Totally dependent on others to have all his needs met.

We watched as Gabriel’s presence provided the doorway for others to enter and safely minister to his wider community. He became the catalyst for the formation of an exemplar support group marked out by peace. Significant community-wide health facilities were developed because of his needs. He compelled people to think about the way they viewed God and the world. It was very clear that if you were to eradicate Gabriel’s presence from the favelas of Sao Paulo the objectives of God would be significantly hindered.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider who it is that participates in the Mission of God? Maybe we need to broaden our definitions of ‘participation’ and the ‘Mission of God’? I wonder how our leaders, our churches, and our mission agencies might be different as a result.

In what ways might your weakness become a strength?