

The Big Conversation - Joanna Jepson

March 2004

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published in Conservatism

Sitting in Parliament's Central Lobby, Joanna Jepson does not immediately strike the onlooker as a classic disability rights campaigner, but first impressions can be deceptive and there can be no doubt about her commitment to championing the interests of disabled children.

Smiley, personable and absolutely authentic, Joanna Jepson exudes a deep sense of joy and compassion. She is not an angry or embittered woman, and her appeal and persuasiveness are all the more compelling as a result.

Joanna, 27, is a curate at St Michael's Chester, and graduated in Theology at Trinity College, Bristol, before training for ordination at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. In November 2003, she began legal proceedings against West Mercia police after they failed to investigate an abortion carried out more than six months into a woman's pregnancy, reportedly on the basis that her baby had a cleft palate. Joanna initially reported the case to police in October, after discovering it in a list of official statistics. On 1 December, she won the right to a judicial review. The High Court gave her permission to challenge in court the refusal of the police to prosecute.

The curate's commitment to the cause does not simply stem from theological study and moral conviction but from her life experience. Joanna herself had corrective surgery for a congenital jaw abnormality as a child, and her 25-year-old brother Alastair has Downs Syndrome, a condition sometimes used as a reason for carrying out late abortions.

"To take away lives for such reasons is completely abhorrent", says Joanna. "Having been in that position myself, is society saying I should have died? I'm driven by a sense of injustice. My brother was bullied because of his Downs Syndrome, and this has given me a real sense of passion. The fact is that some of these babies are wiped out because they're not perfect. There is nothing and no-one to protect them, except the law. And when that becomes abused, they don't stand a chance. They have no voice. I want to be that voice if I possibly can, and hopefully others will be as well."

Joanna's campaign has taken the public and the media by storm. It has come as a surprise and concern to people, including those who support abortion, that a cleft lip is considered a major disability, especially as the operation to correct it is a routine one. Worryingly, a spokeswoman for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists recently confirmed that it is left to the doctor's discretion over what is considered a 'major handicap' in relation to abortion law.

"I'm overwhelmed with how positive the media has been towards me," says Joanna. 'That's fantastic and I'm really glad to see that they value the genuine interests that I have, that they're interested in the vulnerable in society, to see that they're not trampled on and just disregarded.'

Jepson is optimistic about the judicial review. "When I first took this case on I didn't think it would go anywhere really, but as time has gone on and the support of the Disability Rights Group has grown, strength has been given to my case and it feels less like me taking on the Big Boys. It's clear that other people feel strongly about this and their experience and what they have to say will have to be taken seriously when the case is actually heard."

What of the Joanna Jepson beneath the public campaigner? It's difficult to separate the two, for, as Joanna says "I need to express what I am by what I do."

"I've never wanted to be a Parish Priest. Unless something changes, I'm headed in more of a chaplaincy direction. I want to engage theologically with culture and society, especially those areas that don't have a theological voice or where the Churches' voice isn't heard. People just aren't coming into contact with the voice of faith. So I'll be looking into different ways of doing

that and being quite creative with how I shape that kind of ministry'.

'I think the area of image and identity is a massive one for us more and more with the cult of celebrity, the fashion industry and within those kinds of places. People are putting their aspirations in precarious places, defining their identity in their image. In studying for my MA, I've been looking at how we're losing sight of who we really are. And that brings us back to the case. I'm involved in it because we're missing the point of what it means to be a human and we're forming our identity in very vacuous external features, and it's leaving us empty.'

Joanna's worldview naturally informs her view on child protection. 'I see that we're children of God and we demonstrate that in how we invest ourselves and where we give ourselves.'

Talking to Joanna, it's difficult to imagine that, if circumstances had been different, she herself could have been denied the opportunity to experience life outside the womb. Can a culture that allows abortions after six months and considers a cleft lip a 'serious handicap' claim to be civilized? The outcome of the judicial review will help answer that question.