

MORNING SERVICE 11.00AM Sunday 25 August 2019

Luke 13: 10-17

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Luke 13: 10-17

We could do with a bit more background here Luke.

It's tempting to read this story as a pantomime.

Jesus the Goody – Cheers. Hurrah!

The woman – also a Goody – Cheers again. Hurrah.

The leader of the synagogue the Villain – Boo Hiss!

But it isn't a pantomime. Let's look closer at the three main characters in this story: Jesus, the woman and especially the leader of the synagogue.

Jesus was in a synagogue in Jerusalem. He noticed the woman who has been bent over for 18 years. He healed her. Why? The clear answer is that he had compassion on her – he felt her pain and suffering, wanted to do something about, and did something about it.

Why was the woman there? There is no suggestion that she knew Jesus was there, "*just then, there appeared a woman*". She was there to worship and learn about God.

What about the leader of the synagogue? We know why he was there – to lead the service. But why do you think he reacted in this way?

Jesus by now was well known. As a teacher, miracle worker and partly as a troublemaker. He walks in. And he demonstrates compassion.

Are we to assume that the leader has no compassion at all – even for this woman who possibly he has known for years? Perhaps, but it seems to me much more likely that he panics. What's going on here? Miracles? Whatever next! So, he falls back on what he does understand- **rules** and **rituals**, "Look this is the way we do things. There are rules that we shouldn't do things like this on the Sabbath."

Imagine **you** are the leader of the synagogue. Jesus walks in and possibly smiles at you? If I was the leader, I suspect fear would set in. No. I **KNOW** it. **FEAR** would set in. The terrible realisation that I was probably no longer in control.

Rules and rituals can take over and divert us from the heart of our faith. Divert? Perhaps “protect” would be a better word.

Because, just like smallpox, a little religion can inoculate us against real faith.

“Sacred Wonders” is a series on TV. Have you seen it? It looks at strange rituals that happen in religious communities around the world.

Men are repairing the walls and roof of a mud mosque in Mali. A man says, “Without this mosque our lives have no meaning”. Really? I doubt Mohammed taught that.

Or the Shinto/ Buddhist Stupa where the man had to throw orange paint over the dome in perfect arcs. By doing this he would, he said, “earn merit”. I doubt Buddha taught that.

Some of us here will remember Christians who defined themselves by what they **DIDN'T** do:-
This is a quote from a book by Jamie Buckingham:
“We don't dance, smoke, wear make-up, drink alcohol or go to the cinema. That's how people know we are Christians.”

I doubt, no I **know** Jesus didn't teach that.

By hiding behind rules and rituals, we find a way to control God. We stop ourselves from listening and giving God the opportunity to say, “Step out of your comfort zone and do this for me.”

As a student I went for a while to the Anglo Catholic Chaplaincy. A “Good Service” meant the choir sang in tune, no one dropped anything, the incense in the thing you swing around didn't go out or burst into flames and the liturgy went smoothly. The Bishop of Pontefract Richard Hare, **“We Anglo Catholics have a tendency to admire the bottle instead of drinking the wine.”**

We Methodists can be just as bad sometimes. We can treat a service and a sermon as a ritual.

Just by coming to church - or even saying our prayers every day, we can convince ourselves that we are open to God, listening to God, following God. But really like the Bishop of Pontefract said, we too are not drinking the wine. Just keeping the bottle there – perhaps for emergencies.

Or are we truly open to God speaking to us through hymns, prayers, liturgy, the sermon or even the other members of the congregation?

Spontaneous acts of love seem to define much of Jesus' ministry. Rules and rituals are way down the list of important things.

The primary thing is to love God and be open to his voice.

Talk 2

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

5 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

6 Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'

7 But the LORD said to me,
'Do not say, "I am only a boy";
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

8 Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.'

9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

'Now I have put my words in your mouth.

10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.'

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

We looked at Fear of God. Here is fear of other people.

"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" says God to Jeremiah

Do you know what actually happened to Jeremiah?

Well his fellow priests conspired to kill him. He got away. Then they put him down into a cistern. Then someone rescues - and he is put in prison.

Jeremiah complains to the Lord about all this, "Look in Chapter 1 verse 8 you said ***Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you*** Where is the deliverance bit?"

One of the commentaries says, "**After this (in Chapter 20) he expresses his deep disappointment that speaking God's word has caused him pain and regrets becoming a laughingstock.**" I bet he does! And I bet he *doesn't* say to God, "Look I'd like to express my deep disappointment about how all this is going"

What he does say is probably more like this, "Sorry, I've had enough. I'm NOT going to speak out any more.

But when he actually tries this, he says, "**The word became like fire in my heart and I simply could not hold it in.**"

No one said it would be easy!

You could say to Jeremiah, "Look at the small print!" What do you think '*I will deliver you*' means?

Jeremiah knew very well. He knew that the Children of Israel had been in bondage in Egypt for centuries. Only then did God deliver them. Meanwhile they suffered.

The consistent promise of God throughout scripture is “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

Matthew 28:20 And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

I love you. I am with you. I will never, ever leave you.

But I repeat, “No one ever said it would be easy!”

We are living in a wonderful yet also terrible world.

- Millions of Christians worldwide suffer some degree of persecution.
- Those of us who have been to Leipzig have heard stories of how the church members there suffered under communism. A teacher at the church was forced to choose between her job as a teacher and her faith. She spent the rest of her working life as a cook in a factory canteen.

I wonder if she and the Christians around the world feel like Jeremiah? Tempted to give up, thinking “*I’m not going to speak out any more!*” Yet then discovering that, “***The word became like fire in my heart and I simply could not hold it in.***”

So, in comparison we here in the UK are fortunate. Very fortunate – even though it often may not feel like it.

There are times when we still ask God, “Why?”

The wife and family of PC Andrew Harper will surely be asking this now.

And we do too when something bad happens to us or those we know and love. And we don’t necessarily have an answer that satisfies us.

But what we **DO** have is that promise,

I love you. I am with you. I will never, ever leave you.

Talk 3

We have another reading for this Sunday from Hebrews where the writer contrasts the Old and New Testament. It’s long and complex so here’s the gist of it. .

Hebrews 12: 18-29 (somewhat paraphrased)

You have not - like the Children of Israel in the wilderness - come to something that can be touched, a mountain, or a fire, darkness, gloom, tempest, or a terrifying voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

No, you have come Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to God the judge of all, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

*During the time with Moses in the wilderness, God’s voice shook the earth; but now he has promised that what cannot be shaken may remain. **Therefore, we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken**, so let us give thanks.*

In other words – life eternal. Heaven. The true reality. Solid and immovable.

Now this is deeply unfashionable. "*Pie in the sky when you die!*", we hear others mock.

But perhaps we react against it because we expect so much of our lives here in this world. Much more than many of our sisters and brothers around the world can ever expect.

Listen to this verse from Romans chapter 8 with - if you can - (and this is just an example) the ears of those who were wounded on April 9, 2017 when suicide bombings hit two churches in Egypt, killing over 45 people, maiming many others*.

Verse 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

As I say - deeply unfashionable, but it is what we have been told to expect. And we shouldn't run away from it.

Instead we will sing about those solid joys and lasting pleasures.

1. Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode;
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou mayst smile at all thy foes.
2. See, the streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.
3. Round each habitation hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear,
For a glory and a covering,
Showing that the Lord is near;
Thus deriving from our banner
Light by night and shade by day,
Safe they feed upon the manna
Which He gives them when they pray.
4. Saviour, if of Zion's city,
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name;
Fading is the world's best pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.