

SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 – 10 a.m. on 22.8.10 at St Mary's

Let us imagine that we are part of the large crowd of people who have followed Jesus. Although we may not have heard the whole story, what we have heard is both compelling and also alarming. Now we go into the temple and see this woman, probably well known to the community, and crippled for 18 years for reasons that are not understood by doctors. She may very well be a victim of abuse that has led her emotions to cause her to be physically debilitated. Even in the 21st century such problems are widespread. In the temple we sense that a power struggle is going on. The leader of the synagogue is in charge of the gathering, but Jesus is there too. Without waiting Jesus acts. With a word and a touch, the woman is healed. The synagogue leader is upstaged and angrily makes a procedural complaint. Jesus replies: *you have double standards. You do one thing yourself, and want to stop me doing something different and much more important. You are happy to untie an animal to give it water on the Sabbath. Isn't it far more important to untie this woman – a daughter of Abraham - from the torments of evil, of Satan? And isn't the Sabbath the most appropriate day to do this?* Gradually the crowd begins to understand with thanksgiving that what Jesus is doing and saying for this woman is what he is longing to do for Israel and indeed for the human race, for you and for me, - to release it, to untie it from the bondage of evil.

As we hear more and more about Jesus' healing ministry in the Sunday readings from Luke, we come to see that the healings carry different meanings, depending on how an incident is described, and its' context. Some highlight Jesus' capacity to do remarkable deeds, while others precipitate controversy with the religious authorities. Yet others are didactic: they contain teaching on discipleship. Today's reading includes elements of at least two of these meanings. Since the healing is on the Sabbath, the reaction from the leader of the synagogue is angry and he is quickly put to shame. It becomes a story of controversy which ultimately becomes a negative judgement on the Jewish authorities. But the authority of Jesus is underlined once again, for he has shown beyond doubt that he has extraordinary power over the forces of evil that have enslaved this woman for 18 years. So these two elements, or meanings, of the story, healing and overturning the authorities, mesh together within the context of this story.

If we look a little closer at the conflict between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue we know that he was teaching on the Sabbath. This is what any prophet should be doing on the Sabbath. But we do not know from which text he was preaching. Indeed, the healing of the crippled woman may well have been no more than a dramatic illustration of a textual point.

The persistent and indignant response of the leader of the synagogue was based on his understanding of Exodus 20.9 and Deuteronomy 5.13 (for six days you shall do all your work, and rest on the seventh). He saw what Jesus did as work that should have been done on a weekday. Jesus met the challenge by sharply criticising the synagogue leader's reading of the fourth commandment. Jesus uses a clear and familiar example to show the fallacy of ignoring the woman's need on the Sabbath. And, as we have seen, the crowd see the point quickly, while the authorities are put to shame.

Jesus' prompt reply also shows that he is concerned with much more than a difference of opinion about the **academic** interpretation of texts. The words "You hypocrites" shows his concern with the **moral and practical** interpretation of texts. Here and elsewhere, Luke is identifying three groups: those who are blind to the real meaning of things, those who are blind to their own weaknesses (e.g. 6.42), and those who cannot see evidence of God's activity (e.g. 12.56).

It is striking that the leader of the synagogue completely failed to see that the restoration of the woman to health meant the end of disruption of her social relationships, the end of her exclusion and loneliness. Jesus brought physical well-being as well as reinstatement in the community and Israel, on the Sabbath. This passage also reminds us of Jesus' warnings: he discerned that there was impending crisis in the community and the nation which called for repentance and for changes in the pattern of life. Again, we also live in critical times and prophetic voices are calling for repentance and deep amendment of the way we live, especially in the western world. But rather few seem to be listening and acting at present. We continue to be told that economic growth along traditional lines still remains the overwhelmingly important and yet primitive and inappropriate target for our future.

It is striking that the leader of the synagogue fails to see that Jesus has taken the initiative in releasing the woman from the power of evil, expressed here as the rule of Satan. By forbidding such behaviour on the Sabbath the rulers put themselves on the side of evil, and against Jesus. Their blindness puts them in headlong opposition to the prophet who could have saved them. It is notable that Luke chapter 13 ends with Jesus lament over Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it" (13.34).

This story leaves us with a powerful picture of a divided Israel. The religious leaders are shamed, and indeed condemned for failing to see God's activity in their midst. Jesus as a Jew heals the woman, and she - a daughter of Abraham - praises him. The crowd, people of Israel, rejoice at the wonderful things Jesus is doing. And so, rather than a judgement on Israel, this story actually becomes a fulfilment of the prediction that

Jesus brings division (Luke 12.49-53). Thus this story has immediate and obvious implications for us today. Prophetic voices are calling insistently for repentance, for an awareness of wrongdoing in today's world, and for the need for fundamental change in the way we do things to each other, and to the planet, now and in the future.

Lastly, this story illustrates the difference between obeying the **letter** of scripture and the **spirit** of scripture. Wilberforce refused to be bound by its letter and saw that its spirit was that slavery must be abolished. Now we argue about obedience to the word or spirit of scripture, in relation to the full inclusion of women and gay people in the life of the church. The charge of disobeying scripture is the charge of those who stifle the living word with the written word. They do so to maintain the *status quo* and their prejudices. The living word may be stifled for a long time, but it will prevail. It took three centuries to include the Gentiles, and eighteen centuries to include slaves.

In the light of today's gospel, and after more than twenty centuries of waiting, let us pray with confidence for the infinite love of God to heal and transform all people, regardless of gender or orientation, so that women, and indeed everyone, are fully included in both the secular and religious life of the world. Amen.