

Year C Proper 21

Isaiah 58: 9b-14

Hebrews 12: 1-29

Luke 13: 10-17

God's freeing power in Christ

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

If you had endured eighteen long years with an illness, with no prospect of healing, would you have become resigned to your fate? Would you have come to the point of acceptance and reached a stoic place where the infirmity was part of who you are? Or would you have been resentful, angry, for ever asking questions that can't be answered, such as, "why me?"

I guess I can't answer that question truthfully for myself. I do not have to live with a restrictive condition or a condition that in some way means I am not totally free to do what I would like to do. I know what I would hope I would choose, but...

The woman in our gospel story attends the synagogue on the Sabbath. A Sabbath like any other. A day of rest, a day to remember and honour the liberation of God's people from captivity, release from bondage, a day to reflect on the Torah. This woman is in her own form of bondage, without any hope of release from it. Or so she thought.

In the synagogue Jesus saw her and called her over. He said, "woman you are set free from your ailment". He then laid his hands on her and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Her world was changed in an instant. She was set free from eighteen long years of infirmity. And her first reaction was to praise God.

She had come to church on the Sabbath to honour the liberation of God's people from captivity and she had become a further sign showing God's kingdom breaking through, a release from her own captivity, another significant action showing what God's kingdom on earth will look like: When all will be healed, when all that is wrong will be righted, when all people will be

able to reach their full potential, being who, in God's image, they are intended to be, part of the diverse expression of God in humanity.

But, in this gospel story there is a large fly in the ointment. The leader of the synagogue challenges the legality of Jesus' healing actions, undertaken on the Sabbath.

The leader is so focussed on the rules that he hasn't even considered and reflected on what has happened right before his eyes – the kingdom of God breaking through; a divine and holy intervention. The leader doesn't rejoice that the woman has been healed! He was oblivious to God's act of healing. The gospel narrative closes with the people in the synagogue rejoicing whilst the leader and his supporters no doubt became more indignant.

In this story, do we readily identify with the woman and with Jesus? I expect so. However, I hesitate to say it, quite often I fear that I should identify with the leader of the synagogue; someone who is the keeper of the rules, who seeks to ensure we don't create a chaotic free for all.

And yet, I, and all of you, are called to have a role in bringing glimpses of God's kingdom here on earth. As we have read, many of the most powerful actions showing God's kingdom breaking through are only possible when we don't focus on rules, when we act with the same spontaneous generosity and love as Jesus. When focussing on the 'rulebook' can lead us to miss those opportunities or be a barrier to them taking place.

As some of you will know I have been on Iona for the last two weeks. The first week was what is called 'Community Week', when members of the Iona Community gathered together and shared a week long programme of talks on subjects which challenge and encourage.

This year's programme included presentations from the editor and seven of the contributors of a book called 'Young Woke and Christian: Words from a Missing generation'¹, published earlier this year, written by young Christians (mainly twenty-somethings), about what concerns them and what they expect people of faith to be reflecting on and taking action on. The blurb on the back cover states:

¹ Victoria Turner (ed.), 2022. 'Young Woke and Christian: Words from a Missing generation'. SCM Press, London.

'Young, Woke and Christian' brings together young church leaders and theologians who argue that the church needs to become increasingly awake to injustices in British society. It steers away from the capitalistic marketing ideas of how to attract young people into Christian fellowship and proclaims that the church's role in society is to serve society, give voice to the marginalised and stand up to damaging, dominating power structures. Covering themes such as climate change, racial inclusivity, sexual purity, homelessness, food poverty, sexuality, trans identity, feminism, peace-making, interfaith relations, and disability justice, the collection is a cry for the reform of the church to not ally with 'woke' issues because they are popular with youth, but because they are gospel issues.'

Some of the topics discussed I don't think would cause any of us to blink or reach for the 'rule book' like the leader of the synagogue did. However, I imagine that some of these issues will land on some of us differently, and some of the issues may challenge our understanding of how to live a fulfilled life, what being in God's image means, and we may start to reach for the Bible to defend our positions.

What I took away from the week's presentations and discussions is a reaffirmation that all of humanity is made in God's image, and for some people that means they express themselves differently. They have been wonderfully made and find themselves attracted to people of the same sex or both sexes, or find that they have the physical attributes of one sex but in no way identify with that sex. These are but two of the many issues that we discussed. What is clear to me is that whilst we have people who feel unable to openly live out who they are because they fear negative judgements and discrimination, these people are restrained and in bondage like the woman in the synagogue in our gospel reading today. We know that the mental health of many suffer when they feel unable to fully express themselves.

I support anyone whose health is suffering because they feel society's pressures to conform mean they cannot truly live out the life and identity they feel is true to them. I do feel the church needs to be a safe sanctuary for anyone, without judgement, where people can be true to themselves, and be honest.

The gospel reading gives a succinct picture of a woman released from her own form of restraint and bondage, her reaction to being set free, and the rejoicing of those around her. The gospel reading gives us a wee glimpse of God's

kingdom. A kingdom where everyone has been set free to be what God intended for them. A kingdom where there is no conflict between what is good for each one of us and what is good for all of us.

At some point in the coming months, I will wish us as a congregation to explore the congregation's mind on whether to permit same-sex marriages to take place in St James the Less. Not that I have had any such requests yet.

In the meantime, I commend the book, 'Young, Woke and Christian' to you to read, and in fact I will make it one of the faith books we will discuss in 2023 on a 5th Monday.

For now, when you think of God's kingdom, the ultimate future we are all called to work towards, how might you be able to contribute to it, and what personal challenges do young progressive Christians and the 21st century society cause you to consider and pray about?

Where do your instincts about the 'rules' (the leader of synagogue inside you) and your instincts about acts of healing, grace and mercy (Jesus' healing of the woman) and of rejoicing by the woman leave you?

I leave those questions with you and invite you to consider these in your times of personal prayer.
