

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> August

Isaiah 58:9b-end  
Hebrews 12:18-end  
Luke 13:10-17

### **Freedom and release (the healing of the crippled woman)**

Here is a story of release. Of freedom. Of new beginnings.

Here is story that allows us to hear clearly what God is saying to each one of us. Release. Freedom. New beginnings.

Here is a story that mirrors the Christian message. Of release. Of freedom. Of new beginnings.

It's a sad fact that many people feel bound and restricted by their physical condition. Here we have a woman who is bent double. Has been for 18 years. Unable to hold her head up in society – literally and metaphorically. Judged as useless by those around her. Shunned. Excluded. Ignored. Marginalised. Trapped and imprisoned by her physical disability.

We probably know such people today. We see them; we judge them. We may not mean to, but we leap to conclusions. Conclusions based on assumptions. Assumptions with little evidence to support them. Assumptions that in our minds become unassailable facts.

But its not just physical things that can bind us and imprison us. We can also be bound and restricted by our traditions and our culture.

In this story we have someone else who is bound. A synagogue ruler who cannot see beyond the boundaries of the rules and traditions he has based his life upon.

Not that he was cut off from the world around him. Indeed he would be respected, honoured and treated well. But he was cut off from possibilities of new things. Cut off from the potential that lay within him. Cut off from the hope that God was offering to him. Cut off from a life that could be different and more fulfilling.

We probably know people like this today as well. They are sure that they are right; unable to recognise that others might see things differently. Unwilling to consider the possibility that things don't have to be as they are. Incapable of seeing anything beyond the walls they have built to protect themselves.

And we have Jesus in the synagogue. Meeting both of them.

Seeing the woman. Really seeing her. Not just as a cripple but as a person. As a person loved and valued by God. A daughter of Abraham – emphasising both her rightful position as an equal in society and her immeasurable value to God.

He saw her – presumably he bent down so that he could look her in the eyes. He really SAW her. As the person she was and as the person she could become. He recognised that this physical deformity was having effects far beyond the physical – it was affecting her emotionally, spiritually and within society. She was trapped and bound by it. He recognised that she needed release, freedom and a new beginning. So he healed her.

And as she stood up she expressed her new found freedom by praising God. Because she could see that something new had begun. The looks, the assumptions, the prejudices which had bound her and imprisoned her were dissolving away. She was free. Freed from the past and freed for the future. Freed for a life where she could be herself, reach her potential and praise the God who had made it happen.

So lets stop for a moment as we reflect on this woman. And I will read a poem written by Veronica Zundel which I hope will help us:

*Upright*

*I stand and am not standing:  
doubled, I make half a person  
bent like a question mark.  
I do not meet men's stare;  
my destiny to look sidelong  
eyes scuttling like startled crabs.  
Invisible stones weigh down my back.  
loaded by a hard hand.  
Talk shuttlecocks above, across me  
over my head,  
never to me,  
never until –*

*He kneels before me like one washing feet,  
those eyes straight into mine:  
'Up', he says*

*and as he stands, incredibly  
I uncrick and am dizzily,  
terrifyingly, tall.  
'Daughter of Abraham', he says.*

*And now I go equal, unbound  
calling to all Abraham's daughters*

*in the hearing of all stone-loaders:  
'Woman, crooked, infirm, Satan-skewed,  
Woman, you are free.'*

But – and unfortunately there was, as there so often is, a but in the story. But.

This was the sabbath. And the sabbath is a day of rest. No work to be done. A day on which God had decreed we should be free from all labour, free to rest and to worship.

So our synagogue ruler stands up.

And I think we should point out that the synagogue ruler was probably an upright and honest man, trying to live his life as he should. Trying to serve God and to encourage others to do the same. But he had made a terrible mistake.

The way things were, the rules, the traditions, (though there was nothing wrong in them in themselves) had become the way things must always be. Whereas the synagogue ruler thought he was worshipping and serving God, he was in fact worshipping and serving the rules and traditions which had themselves become set in stone. Which was a shame. Those rules and traditions were supposed to help people in their search for God and in their following of God, but instead they had become barriers that prevented people from seeing where God might be at work.

So our synagogue ruler stands up and declares that what Jesus had done was work and so should not be done on the sabbath.

But Jesus sees through his complaint and recognises where he is coming from.

Not so – he says – the whole purpose of sabbath is to release people from bondage and oppression. It's a day when the work and the drudgery of life can be set aside as we enjoy rest and worship. It's a day when we are freed from the things that bind us. Freed to be in God's presence and enjoy being in his presence.

The sabbath is also a foretaste of what God has in store for us. The sabbath rest of the kingdom of God when it is fully established. Eternal life. When we are freed from all the things that hold us back. Freed to be in the presence of God for evermore.

What better day to heal this woman than the day of freedom, the sabbath?

We know that the woman in this story was released. Released and freed from the physical deformity that caused so much pain and suffering in her life. Released and freed to live a new life. Like so many of the characters in the gospel, we never hear of her again – but we can imagine her future. Imagine it as so much better and more fulfilling than her past.

But we don't know about the synagogue ruler. How did he react to what Jesus said? Did he become – as so often happens – more entrenched in his views and his adherence of the traditions? Or did he see the glimpse of a possibility of something new happening? Did he allow God to break through the barriers he had created? We just don't know.

But this story of release and freedom can also ask questions of us as individuals and as a community.

Questions about rules and traditions. Perhaps those we adhere to in church. Perhaps those that affect the ways people live. Perhaps those that govern global economic systems.

Do things have to be as they have always been? Are these rules and traditions which structure our lives things that are of God or are they things that have become like God. Untouchable and unchangeable?

In the church and in our own lives:

Do we have to worship in certain patterns?

Do we have to refer to God in certain ways?

Do we have to hold "traditional" views of marriage or sexuality?

Can we dare to be different and to change?

In the world around us:

Does the economy have to be more important than the person?

Can we imagine changing the way we – and the world – live to be more environmentally friendly?

Can we move away from an us and them view of the world (in terms of race, gender, nation, creed or whatever)?

And can we move towards a world where all are welcomed and seen as sons and daughters of Abraham – people loved and accepted by God and the world?

Cast your minds back in Luke's gospel to the moment when Jesus' public ministry began – way back in chapter 4. He was, as today, in a synagogue. And he read from the prophet Isaiah –

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

So a few moments to ponder ...

In what ways are we held captive or bound or imprisoned.

And in what ways can we be set free to best serve God and his world?