

Revd Dr Lisa Cornwell

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2019

St John the Baptist, Crowthorne

8am: Holy Communion

10am: Sung Eucharist

Year C

Proper 16/ Trinity 10

**Readings:** Isaiah 58:9b-14  
[Hebrews 12:18-29]  
Luke 13:10-17

**Theme:** Compassion over legalism  
**Complement:** Sabbath observance

Picture the scene... There is a new teacher in town and he has been invited to speak in the synagogue. This man is different from the other rabbis. People have been talking about him. They have heard stories about his teaching and it has even been said that he heals people. Those gathered are curious to hear what he has to say. The atmosphere in the synagogue is hushed and expectant as Jesus speaks. He is clearly well educated in the Jewish scriptures. He teaches with a passion and wisdom beyond his years. As he continues to speak, his gaze rests upon a woman who has appeared at the back of the room. She is bent double, severely crippled. He breaks off from what he is saying and there is a pregnant pause as all eyes roam from Jesus to the woman and back to Jesus again wondering what will happen next. He calls her forward and declares, "Woman you are set free from your ailment." There is a sharp intake of breath from the audience as Jesus reaches out and places his hands upon her and she stands up upright. The woman's face is radiant with joy and utter relief as she bursts out in spontaneous praise to God.

The congregation are delighted to see such a spectacle but not everyone is so pleased. The synagogue leader raises an objection, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

This will strike us as an over-reaction. Is this really *work*? Isn't he taking it a bit far? For devout Jews it was paramount that they kept to every detail of the out workings of the law of Moses. It was a way of expressing their separateness as a nation chosen by God and holy in his sight.

The religious leaders in Jesus' day were so obsessed with keeping the Law that they had effectively built a fence around the Law in order to protect it. Many minor laws were added to ensure that the commandments weren't broken. In terms of Sabbath observance, centuries of debate had established how to apply the Law to various situations. The *Mishnah* identified no less than 39 different types of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath. If anything vaguely resembled work, it was forbidden in order to rule out the possibility of falling into sin. They had the best of intentions which had become lost in legalism.

Jesus did not set out to break the Sabbath, he was a committed Jew. However, he admonishes the Jewish leaders for having completely missed the point of the Law through their petty mindedness when they should have known better. They had become so weighed down with the detail of the law that they had become blind its essence. The law was primarily a means of expressing God's covenant relationship to his people and the

responsibility on both sides to maintain that. Jesus refers to the woman as “a daughter of Abraham” because she is as much a rightful recipient of God’s grace as the religious leaders. It is yet another example of how Jesus sought to include the outcasts in society. Jesus demonstrates God’s mercy. For him, remaining faithful to the law, meant acting out of compassion. None the less, Jesus refutes the synagogue leader and those like-minded by also arguing his case on their terms: He makes the connection between loosening a tethered animal and unbinding the woman. Jewish tradition allows some work on the Sabbath such as leading an Ox to water. A human life is more important than an Ox and therefore surely if it is permissible to untie an Ox on the Sabbath, it is appropriate to set free a human being from their suffering.

Although the text says the woman was crippled by a spirit, as the story unfolds it is clearly a physical healing that is being carried out not an exorcism. However, Jesus is not simply concerned with physical healing, his ministry is much more far reaching. For him, physical healing is not to be separated from the spiritual. Jesus comes to bring spiritual wholeness. Notice that the woman’s first response is to glorify God. Restored on the Sabbath. It is quite fitting.

But how does this translate for today? The irony is that society has now gone in completely the opposite direction. There is no holy hedge around the Sabbath. The rules and regulations about what can be done on a Sunday have been lifted. We live in a permissive society. Sunday has become, in the main, like any other day. Anyone, not just medics and clergy, may be expected to work and the shopping malls continue to trade. This does not only have a detrimental effect upon church attendance but upon family life and peoples' sense of personal well-being. The notion of Sabbath rest, of a day set aside for worship, recovery and re-creation, becomes ever elusive and we are the worse off for it. Compassion in our context means permitting people to have a work-free Sunday. According to *The Times*, the Dutch have the concept of *niksen*, which means "doing nothing" - being idle with no agenda, no purpose. We need to reclaim the Sabbath, not in a legalistic but in a life-giving way.

Heed the words of the prophet Isaiah (58:13-14a):

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honourable;  
if you honour it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
then you shall take delight in the LORD.

What are the legalisms, the compulsions, the blind spots, that Jesus would challenge us over today? Where have we lost sight of God's bigger picture?... In the relentless drive to achieve, to meet ever increasing targets, to consume, we have stripped the earth and burnt ourselves out. The discipline of Sabbath rest brings healing to the earth and our lives. Can we be realigned with its God intended purpose? Love God, love our neighbour, love ourselves and our priorities in life will fall into place.

A prayer by David Adam to conclude:

Lord, I am poured out,  
I come to you for renewal.  
Lord, I am weary,  
I come to you for refreshment.  
Lord I am worn,  
I come to you for restoration.  
Lord I am lost,  
I come to you for guidance.  
Lord I am troubled,  
I come to you for peace.  
Lord, I am lonely,  
I come to you for love.  
Come, Lord,  
Come revive me  
Come re-shape me  
Come mould me in your image.  
Re-cast me in the furnace of your love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ashwin, *Book 1,000 Prayers*, 89-90.