

The Freedom of God's Kingdom

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 25th August 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 58:9b – end; Luke 13:10 – 17

This morning's Gospel reading is all about Jesus setting someone free. As we read the Gospels, it's one of the things that Jesus does wherever he goes, he sets people free: when he casts out demons, he's setting people free from mental and spiritual torment; when he feeds the 5000, he is setting people free from hunger; when he forgives people their sins, he's setting them free from guilt and self-hatred; and when he announces the Kingdom of God, he's setting people free from hopelessness and despair, and the sense that nothing can ever change.

In this morning's passage Jesus meets a woman who is physically bent double and crippled and he sets her free from her condition. In fact he explicitly uses the language of freedom, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And then at the end of the passage he elaborates on that idea of setting her free, "Ought not this woman" he says to the leader of the synagogue - "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" It seems Jesus believes the woman's captivity to be spiritual more than physical. She may be bent double but the physical ailment is just a symptom of a much deeper problem. It's Satan who is the problem rather than her body. And he's offended by her captivity. Why so? Well because she's supposed to be a daughter of Abraham, a Jew, and the identity of the Jewish people is bound up with this idea of freedom. The Jews are the nation who trace their origin back to an act of liberation, when God rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and brought them to freedom and the promised land and our first reading spoke of the Prophet promising God's people freedom from captivity in exile.

So this idea of freedom is one of the defining features of God's people. And Jesus is offended by the idea that you shouldn't set people free on the Sabbath, because the

whole point of the Sabbath was to remind people that they were no longer slaves and that they had been set free from pressure to perform. The Sabbath was there to set aside one day when people were free from the need to produce anything or to achieve anything or to justify their existence in any way. And it was a sign of what life on earth is destined for; it's a sign of the new creation of the promise of heaven: that God has made the world for people to enjoy is not to be enslaved by it. And Jesus says we even let animals loose on the Sabbath, so how much more this woman. It's absolutely right that he should set this woman free on the Sabbath day.

It's worth pondering what she might have been being set free from. Jesus says that Satan had bound her, but that needn't be as dramatic as it sounds: perhaps she had been abused as a child; perhaps she'd never married, in a society where that was all important for women; perhaps her condition meant that she had become a social outcast, rejected by the community. All of those things could have led to her having a very negative view of herself, and our bodies often reveal the stresses that we live under - and perhaps this woman's body had curled up like that of a hedgehog: curled up in fear; curled up in pain, curled up because her experience of the world had been unremittingly hostile. And Jesus set her free with a direct experience of the loving acceptance and grace of the Living God.

So what about you and me? What are the things that might hold us captive and stop us from growing tall and free? Most of us will have had experiences and memories of the past that have at some point been damaging: the unkind words or demands of an overbearing parent; the rejection of someone we love; the harsh judgment of a teacher or someone in authority; or maybe an experience of something much worse than that. And we've allowed those experiences to take us captive, to define who we are, to limit us and prevent us from becoming the people God would have us be. And then there's a real risk that we end up repeating the cycle with those who look to us as examples: and so victims become bullies; the judged become judgmental; the criticized become bitter and critical of others.

Often we are held captive by the opinions of other people, who define the limits of what is acceptable: what we can and can't do; who we can and can't be. And sometimes we

feel hemmed-in, forced to play a role we didn't choose. And we may find ourselves held captive by bigger social force forces: racism or prejudice of all sorts. If you live on a 'sink estate', you'll be surrounded by poverty and crime and addiction. And that's bound to make a difference to what's possible in your life. There are increasing rates of mental health problems for teenagers and young people, linked to peer pressure and social media. So we're surrounded and limited and hemmed in by all sorts of problems that are bigger than we are as individuals.

But Jesus's healing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath day holds out the promise of a different kind of world, run according to a different set of rules: a world designed to set people free; a world where all are accepted and valued and forgiven; where people no longer oppress or exploit each other; where every life is a gift and doesn't have to be justified; where one person's freedom doesn't have to be at the expense of another's. Jesus affirms the woman's true identity as a free Daughter of Abraham, as a child of God, accepted and loved. For her, it wasn't just a private religious experience, it was an act of social inclusion because the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing. They were catching a glimpse of the Kingdom of God breaking in and they were getting a sense of what true freedom looks like: not just freedom of speech or freedom of movement; not just freedom of capital; or freedom from Brussels; but freedom to be human; freedom to love and to be loved; freedom to trust and not be rejected; freedom from the past; freedom to accept yourself; freedom to live without fear.

The words that Jesus spoke to the woman on that occasion he speaks to you and to me in bread and wine this morning: whoever you are, whatever holds you captive, you are set free from your limitations - remembering of course always that such freedom carries with it the responsibility to do all that we can to live in such a way as to set others free, and to make the freedom of God's kingdom a reality for all.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 58:9b-end

^{9b} You shall cry for help, and He will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. ¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. ¹³ 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 honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And 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. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But 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." ¹⁵ But 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?" ¹⁶ And 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?" ¹⁷ When 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.