



# *Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 21 August 2022

### READINGS

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Psalm 71: 1-6; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17

## *Life and society*

A hearty welcome to our online congregation. May God bless us all as we try to hear God's voice and let us rejoice in this opportunity of meeting with our Creator.

I want to focus specifically on our Gospel reading this morning. On the surface it appears to be a fairly straightforward healing story, a miraculous healing by Jesus, with the added irritation of the president or ruler of the synagogue, but if we look at the three main players, Jesus, the woman, and the ruler, we can see that this is more than what we expect from a miracle story. We learn a lot more about life and society from this.

Let's look at the woman first. The position of Jewish women in new Testament times had changed quite considerably, but the role of women was never as oppressed as we think it was. If you read the Old Testament carefully, you will see that women were very liberated for the ancient world. But now, after many years of firstly, Greek and then Roman rule, that culture seriously affected the Jewish way of doing things, and women were meant to stay at home, were not allowed to work unless there was absolutely no man to support her, and then job opportunities were rare. Women had never been allowed to participate in Temple rituals, but now they were separated from the men in synagogue worship and in daily life. They even said different prayers. Judaism has always seen women's role as complementary to that of a man. Now it was inferior.

So this woman who had a serious condition - and when it is due to an "evil spirit", there would be those who would wonder why her, what had she done. She would be unable to carry out the duties which every woman would have to do in the home, and being permanently bent over, it meant that her internal organs would not function properly, so she would have suffered considerable discomfort. If she had suffered for 18 years, she would have been used to it by now, and the prospect of a visit from Jesus would have been more about a better preacher this Sabbath than anything else. This is one of the few occasions when Jesus took the initiative. Mostly people asked for healing, and Jesus would ask them what they wanted him to do. This time, he called out to her and healed her - a woman, and during Sabbath worship. The fact that he laid hands on her would mean more than a prayer ritual. It meant that her twisted body was not a thing slightly horrifying, or to be despised. He touched her. He straightened her. He freed her body, but in doing so freed her mind too. She was, once again, a whole, functioning, human being. Not a wonder she praised God.

Now what about the ruler of the synagogue? His job was to manage the buildings and the property and administration of the synagogue. He was also expected to manage the worship and to make sure it was properly done, and he had the authority of chastising anyone who broke the law. Something like a combination of church warden, worship leader and canon theologian. He was elected by the community, but was only eligible for the office if he had a certificate from the Great Sanhedrin.

A Sanhedrin was a governing body in many parts of the country and were the government of the land. The Great Sanhedrin consisted of leading scholars, authorities in law, religion and education, and all of these were under their control. The leader was the High Priest, and he was seen as the political leader of the Jews, but only with the permission of the Romans. It is with him and this body that the Roman authorities would negotiate issues.

So the work of this authority in Judea would be to keep the Jewish nationalist hotheads under control so that the mighty military machine of the Romans would not roll in and quash any revolt with the thoroughness only a successful empire can perform, but at the same time, the Sanhedrin had to make sure the Jewish people knew they were Jews even though they were under Rome. Taxes had to be paid to Rome and to the Jewish Temple. Roman law had to be kept and the Torah needed to be observed.

Now why are we going in to all this? Because the leader of this synagogue had a problem. He would have been involved in allowing Jesus to preach, but Jesus didn't always keep to the brief. He disrupted worship by calling the woman up in the middle of the service. He broke the Sabbath by healing when healing was "work." The ruler tried to get control again by speaking to the congregation (not Jesus) saying in effect, "Don't get any ideas. This is out of order – if she had been afflicted for 18 years, what difference would one more day make? The law is still the law." However Jesus was angry, and called him and the other leaders "hypocrites." Jesus had a counter-argument, and the end result was that the people praised God. What more do you want in an act of worship?

Now I cannot know what was in Jesus' mind, and I wouldn't presume to try to tell you. But the Bible allows us to see what Jesus did, and to learn from that how he interpreted the desires of the Father, and hence learn from that example how we are meant to be fully the disciples of Christ.

Firstly, his absolute compassion for the woman. 18 years infirmity was long enough. She had to be healed NOW, and as a human being, keeping her waiting was not good enough. When we think of the queues at our clinics and hospitals, and how the suffering have to wait hours and sometimes days and sometimes are not treated at all, I think we can understand that Jesus saw to it that she didn't have to suffer any longer. He healed her by laying his hands on her. By touching her, any thought of her illness as a demon, or as being unclean, would go. She was not only healed, she was vindicated and restored to the community as a whole, person.

Then we get the synagogue leader. Now we must understand that the law was and is a gift from God, and as such there was always an element of mystery about it. "What does the law say in this context." Discussion around its finer points was the way Jews talked about it, interpretation being as important as obedience. Here Jesus is pointing out that that these "hypocrites" interpreted the law to suit their own situations. Jesus himself opened up a conversation around interpretation, which was talking to the leaders in their own language. They were not supposed to travel further than a certain number of paces from their homes on the Sabbath, but if their animals were thirsty, they were allowed to lead them to water. Some more punctilious ones would build a shelter over the watering hole and call it a "home" and let the animals

stay there – they could call it a home if more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the animal was in the shelter – so that the animals were not travelling anywhere to drink water. So why was the ruler suddenly laying down edicts like a Roman about healing this woman? That was the hypocrisy, and Jesus seems to have seen it as a power struggle. The ruler had a typical Torah discussion around it with Jesus, instead he took it out on the defenceless congregation in the best Roman military tradition. Jesus called the woman a “daughter of Abraham.” In other words, she was Jewish as they all were, and yet they were treating her as of less value than an animal. No wonder they were humiliated.

So where does that leave us? Firstly, this is not about “the law is bad.” It’s about the law as a gift from God to make our lives better. Jesus didn’t break the law so much as to re-interpret it – and he was well within his rights as a rabbi to do so. Any legal system is designed to bring order to a community and guardians of that law, be they community police or keepers of the moral code, like churches and to some extent, education, and social services are there to see to it that such law is for the well being of all, particularly those who find it difficult to fend for themselves. If anything around the law frightens innocent people, then either the laws are bad laws made at the whim of a tyrannical regime, or they are administered by people who would manipulate them for their own benefit. The ruler of the synagogue was using the law to control and frighten people, and to diminish what Jesus had done in the eyes of those who would rejoice in the healing of the woman.

A word used a lot in this passage is the word “freedom.” The woman is set free from her infirmity. Jesus points out that animals are set free to go and get water. One of the greatest consequences of God’s love is the freedom it gives. Jesus came to set us free from the guilt of our sin. Jesus brought healing from illness, and throughout its history until modern times, hospitals were for a long time institutions of church ministry. Faith in Christ also brings freedom through education, social support, but most of all, it brings the freedom to be ourselves as we were made to be. We can enjoy being who we are because God created us and gave us Christ who loved us enough to die for us, to forgive us our sins, and who remains with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus healed the woman, not only of her physical affliction, but by calling her out, he showed her that she was important. He understood her suffering and loved her enough to free her from it immediately, Sabbath or no Sabbath. Years of being a problem to her family, and being unable to do anything helpful for anyone would have flattened her self-esteem, and Jesus restored that and when he lifted her to an upright position, he also lifted her spirits and she became whole again.

None of us are perfect human beings. We all have areas of hurt, of illness, of damage which tie us into a life that is less than fulfilling. We have become so used to it, that we don’t notice it anymore. We think that that’s just who we are. But Jesus calls us out of our rut. He will use anything – life experiences, friends, a chance remark, or a word in a prayer or hymn, and we will know that we are being called out of our hole, we will be made to stand upright, and will be initiated into something we didn’t know was missing, and in the power of Jesus’ love, we too will praise God. May this be true of all of us.