

Bennochy church 11th August 2019

Today is the second of, what I am calling, the '*John Bell passages*'. Last week I mentioned that he led a Presbytery retreat, where he chose three passages to look at. Last week we looked at the story of Lot's wife, in escaping from the city of Sodom, she looked back and was turned to salt. Apart from not looking back to the past, John raised the idea, that God uses old people, to do new things. This week, we have one of the healing miracles of Jesus.

The context is important. It is the Sabbath. The Jewish Holy day going back to the ten commandments. This is the basis of the accusation that will be made against Jesus, and, note that Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. That was normal practice for Jesus, and not unusual in his role as a rabbi. This incident happens in the synagogue.

There is here a great description of a woman in great pain. "*There was a woman present, so twisted and bent over with arthritis that she couldn't even look up. She had been afflicted with this for eighteen years.*" (Message, Luke 13: 11) Feel her pain. That was the reality of her life, and that is what Jesus saw.

In his translation, Eugene Peterson identifies the illness as arthritis. That is helpful, because it is something we can identify with. In ancient times, what they saw at work, was described as evil spirits.

The specific illness is not important. It was to the woman, absolutely, but not to the point of the story. In releasing her. In making her free from pain, which is what is described here, and Jesus is at its centre, is part of a universal, eternal, and monumental struggle between good and evil. That is what Luke is saying. That is how his readers would understand it, and it goes some way to explain the response of the synagogue official.

Healing miracles are part of a bigger picture. They are all about a theology that says, God can defeat evil. In this story, Jesus is taking on that "God" role. He is the healer, the one who defeats evil. So there is lots going on here. A good - evil power struggle. Jesus is identifying himself with God and the fact that he healed the woman on the Sabbath. The official says to Jesus, you don't heal people on the Sabbath. You have another six days in which to do that. You can almost hear Jesus say to himself, 'Tell that to the woman! Say to her; you can come back tomorrow. '

Jesus then gets stuck in. He throws the whole question of what you can and can't do on the Sabbath, back at them. Are there not times you break the ancient law? What right have you to condemn what I have done. Surely this woman can be healed on the Sabbath.

I want to pick up on those final words of Jesus, and this where John bell comes in. The Message translation says this, ⁵⁻¹⁶ *But Jesus shot back, "You frauds! Each Sabbath every one of you*

regularly unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So why isn't it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years?" The action of Jesus, is about releasing her potential.

It does not matter what binds us. Jesus offers freedom. In this story, healing allows the woman to get on with the rest of her life. What must that have felt like? Feel the release! Crammed into just a few words. One miracle amongst many, is what the Good News is all about. What did Jesus say in another earlier synagogue sermon,

God's Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free,

to announce, "This is God's year to act!" (Luke 4: 18)

If you are going to sum up the Good news. There it is.

I wonder how we understand this idea of releasing our potential. The 'before' and the 'after', of our encounter with Jesus. Substitute ourselves into the story and what happens? Are we straightened up and set free? To go on life's journey, based on a new way of living, that says something like; love

God, love your neighbour, the stranger and ourselves. That's it. And in the midst of all of that, there is still the ongoing clash between good and evil, in whatever way we wish to understand that. Look around the world and feel its pain. That is the context of life. Much of which we simply do not understand, especially when move into the world of miracle and mystery. What we see is 'bad things happening to good people'.

It does not matter what day of the week it is, God's challenge is for the kingdom values of compassion, peace, equality and justice to be made known. And in releasing our potential, in Christ, we seek the good of others. It is never an easy path to follow. It never will be. People will stand and criticise. They will fail to understand God's love, whose only boundary, is eternity. Amen.