

Sunday 22 August: Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Be healed, stand up and praise God.

Readings: Hebrews 12.18-29; Luke 13.10-17

Both readings today turn around the relationship between Jesus and what Christians call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Whilst teaching in the synagogue, Jesus healed a crippled woman on the Sabbath. She didn't ask to be healed. Jesus saw her, called her, told her she was set free from her ailment and laid hands on her. For the first time in 18 years, she stood up straight and her first response was to praise God.

This woman, an inferior, in some ways more an object than a person, is contrasted with the leader of the synagogue, a man of course, who just didn't get it. He alleged that healing was 'work' and therefore against God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy and a day of rest. It's a 1st century version of 'the Vicar's got it wrong', not in some minor and inconsequential way, but devastatingly, 180 degrees wrong. There's nothing more oppressive than religious power being misused.

"You hypocrites", said Jesus: "you water your animals on the Sabbath, so why can't this woman be healed?"

"When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame."

Before this passage in Luke there's a parable about a fig tree in a vineyard which bears no fruit. The owner told his gardener to cut it down. "Why should it waste the soil?" But the gardener pleaded for the tree to have one last chance. "Let me dig round it, manure it and if it bears no fruit *next year*, you can cut it down." This is a moment of judgement, the last chance for God's people who have become barren.

The healing of the crippled woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath is a wonderful way to show who and what is fruitful. The crowd loved it. There's nothing better than seeing authority shown up. It sells newspapers. So Luke ends the story by saying, "The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing". God is life giving and this story is about the freedom of the new covenant and the life-giving healing it brings. It is hugely attractive. Judgement and the way of the cross might not hold us, but healing and fruitfulness we all like.

What was happening in Jesus was the fulfilment of all that God had done through the people of Israel. The first Christians had little option but to use the language and thought forms of Judaism but it sounds strained and was no longer satisfactory. In Jesus God came among us and made a new relationship with people which the Epistle to the Hebrews says shakes things up. It gets rid of the religious rubbish so that what remains is the eternal.

The old order characterised by legalism, fear and anxiety, is gone. Perfect love casts out fear. No wonder people liked it. The Christian gospel is liberating. But there is an edge, beautifully and fearfully expressed at the end of today's reading from Hebrews:

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12.29)

Judgement, being shaken is a reality for us, not just at the end of our lives but day by day. Rather than be something that either diminishes us or paralyses us from terror, our experience of judgement is that it pulls us up short and turns us round, literally to ‘repent’.

Arthur Miller’s ‘All My Sons’ is currently on in Shaftsbury Avenue. It turns on an incident in the Second World War in which a manufacturer hides a defect in machinery sold to the US air force which resulted in the deaths of 21 men. The owners of the company were prosecuted. One was imprisoned. The other got off falsely. In the end his failure to face up to his wickedness damages not just him as individual but his family and relationships. It’s a wonderful exploration of private and public morality. Joe Keller’s son says to his father that he thought he wasn’t like other men, that he lived by his beliefs and principles, whereas what the play shows is that compromise affects us all. Joe, the father, realised that the 21 who died were all his sons, his responsibility. Coming under judgement is rarely pleasant but it’s often necessary and is the price of honesty in ourselves. There’s a marvellous line about the scars that good people carry being the price of their honesty.

When we get things seriously personally wrong there’s a choice which is presented in the Passion Gospels through the actions of Judas and Peter. Judas was so ashamed of his betraying Jesus that he despaired and could see no future. He went out and hanged himself. Peter who repeatedly got things wrong, and at the critical moment denied he even knew Jesus, kept coming back to start again. He embodied the great passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans chapter 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Peter allowed himself to be remade in truth and by love so that in the resurrection Jesus says, “Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

So the cutting edge represented in Hebrews by “our offering worship with reverence and awe” is not that we are perfect and always get things right, but that we experience repentance, forgiveness, healing and new life. We are people with a vision of God in Christ who can hope that we withstand being shaken, that we will be made fruitful.

Over the last few weeks we have read a section of the Epistle to the Hebrews which explores the meaning of faith and which includes the verse, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight of sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12.1, 2)

This cloud of witnesses, the saints of the Old and New Testament are people who have been fruitful. They were not necessarily perfect. Indeed some led colourful lives, including St Augustine, whom we remember next Friday. He was one of the greatest theologians and bishops of the early Church but who as a young man was resistant to the rigorous demand of God’s call. Looking at the young ladies in church on Sunday mornings he famously prayed, “O Lord make me chaste, but not yet.”

“The truth will set you free” is a strikingly modern sounding verse from John’s Gospel (John 8.32). It is honest self-knowledge which led Augustine on to pray to God, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”. He knew himself and he

knew God. He carried honest scars which allowed him to stand upright, praise God and be fruitful. It is what we long for in ourselves and with each other until we find our rest in God to whom be the glory now and for ever. Amen