

## **'Free indeed'**

A sermon by Andrew Knowles (St George's Church Kendal, Sunday 21 August 2016).

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### **Luke 13.10-17**

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

<sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' <sup>13</sup>When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

<sup>14</sup>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.'

<sup>15</sup>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? <sup>16</sup>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?'

<sup>17</sup>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.

## **'Free indeed'**

Luke Chapter 13 v 12

*When Jesus saw (the crippled woman), he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free.'*

She's not exactly an A-lister among those whom Jesus healed.

She's not Jairus's daughter or Lazarus, or Legion, or the Centurion's servant.

Sometimes the important thing about her seems, not her bad back, but that she was healed on the Sabbath – which meant that Jesus was criticised for 'working' on the Day of Rest.

The leader of the synagogue is unable to rejoice at her healing.

Jesus is undermining his authority – and he's no doubt jealous of Jesus' power and popularity. More than that, he's threatened by Jesus' undeniable *closeness* to God – his 'immediacy' with God.

That's what was enviable!

But with this sea of enthusiasm for Jesus rising all around him, the leader of the synagogue clings to the only plank he knows: that the Fourth Commandment says, on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, *'you shall not do any work'* (Exodus 20.10).

Jesus is not a wonder-worker, he is a law-breaker, a Sabbath-breaker, and this miraculous deliverance of a bent-over woman is not valid.

Jesus' opponents are spiritually blind –  
and, in calling good evil, they are also blasphemous,  
offending the Holy Spirit of God.

Added to this, they are hypocrites, because, as Jesus points out,  
they wouldn't hesitate to untie and water their animals on the  
Sabbath; so how much more should they untie and refresh a woman  
bent double for eighteen long years?

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Only Luke records this story, and he tells us that the woman's spinal  
deformity is due to Satan's power.

It's not a punishment for some sin she's committed in the past,  
but a 'spirit' that has crippled her;  
and Jesus says she has been released from Satan's bondage.

Many of the people Jesus healed, or with whom he kept company –  
were lepers, Samaritans, the paralysed, tax-collectors, prostitutes –  
people *excluded* from their communities, isolated, or relegated to  
the margins – because they weren't ritually clean.

And because they were totally or partially excluded, they were  
prevented from living the free and full lives that God intends for all  
of us.

When Jesus heals such people, he is *including* them –  
welcoming them home to God  
and restoring them to their families and communities.

He's also *drawing a battle line*  
against *all* sickness and prejudice and oppression –  
even if his healings and exorcisms were only token examples –  
signs of the kingdom to come.

Two thousand years on from the miracles of Jesus, there is still untold suffering in the world; but look at how much *has* been achieved since Jesus called us to change our minds about suffering and injustice.

Even the Church was incredibly slow to realise all that the Gospel means in terms of liberty, equality and mutual service.

As Jeffrey John says: 'three centuries to include Gentiles, eighteen to include slaves, and twenty-one to include women' (*The Meaning in the Miracles*, Jeffrey John (Canterbury Press, 2001) p 210.)

Abuse of power and ingrained prejudice are deeply entrenched throughout the human race, but gradually and irresistibly the example and inspiration of Jesus is transforming the world.

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Back with the healing of this bent-over woman, there are some wonderful details in her story.

If you've visited the Holy Land and seen a reconstruction of a synagogue from the time of Jesus, you'll know that only the men were counted in the congregation and they sat downstairs – the women and children were relegated to the gallery.

Imagine the drama when Jesus calls this woman out – to stand centre stage in the male domain!

It's a wonderful touch.

Woman though she is, and crippled as she may be, she's a child of God and as entitled to be there as any man.

As if that's not enough, Jesus lays his hands on her – regardless of the taboo that he might be contaminated by her

menstruation - and addresses her as a 'daughter of Abraham' – affording her her proper status and dignity.

Finally, he enables her to straighten up and look the world in the eye. After eighteen years of staring at her feet, she can hold her head high – free of that oppressive spirit; free of that Satanic power that for so long has incapacitated her.

We were mistaken, weren't we, in our first impression?  
She *is* an A-lister among those healed by Jesus!

An American theologian, Walter Wink, writes:

'Her physical ailment was symbolic of a system that literally bowed women down. For her to stand tall in male religious space represents far more than a healing. It reveals the dawn of a whole new world order.' (*The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink (Doubleday/Augsburg, 1998) pp 70-1, quoted by Jeffrey John.)

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So what is there to add today?

Well, first to highlight something about Jesus and then to highlight something about ourselves.

Something about Jesus:

to notice that he is *compassionate* – radical, high-risk compassionate – in defiance of all social and religious convention

and *that's* a quality of God.

*God* has compassion.

‘Compassion’, literally, means ‘wombs’! (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus J Borg (Harper San Francisco, 1995) p 48).

‘Compassion’ is when we feeling something *visceral* – in our guts - in the core of our being – for a woman, in the womb; for a man, in the bowels.

God feels for us in his womb – remember, in the Old Testament, the talk of his ‘tender mercy’, his ‘loving kindness’ (e.g. Jeremiah 31.20) – that’s what we’re talking about.

We all experienced compassion this past week, when we saw the picture of five year-old, Omran Daqneesh – pulled from the rubble in Aleppo, bloodied and covered with dust, sitting dazed and silent in an ambulance awaiting help –

We all feel compassion – and *that’s* the quality Jesus shows – and *that’s* the passion God has for us.

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And something about ourselves:

We all know what it is to be bowed down long-term.

One of the things which draws us to church is our need for comfort, forgiveness, and words of hope.

We have pain, we have sadnesses,  
we have experienced disappointment and loss,  
We have regrets

There are ongoing, running sores in our relationships – anger and resentment which we hardly know what to do with, no matter how the years roll by . . .

Some issues are with us last thing at night as we go to sleep and still there first thing in the morning when we wake up.

Martin Laird describes these debilitating thoughts as ‘DVDs’ which we keep watching in our heads, or ‘tapes’ which we play over and over –

There may be quite a few of them! (*Into the Silent Land – The Practice of Contemplation*, Martin Laird (DLT, 2006) Chapter 5.

Over time, they can rule us – dragging us into patterns of anger, pain and resentment, from early childhood till our dying day.

We might think the woman bent over for a mere eighteen years got off lightly!

But there is a remedy. There is help and there is hope.

This wonderful, low-key, unfashionable Gospel episode tells us that Jesus can help.

He counters these wearisome, debilitating, recurring narratives, with the inclusive touch of his hands and with his divine assurance that we are free to stand tall:

healed, forgiven and completely loved by God.

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We can stop watching those odious DVDs and playing those dreary tapes –

And declare to any Satanic spirit of oppression  
that we are FREE!

The Son of God, in powerful compassion, *has* set us free,  
and *is* setting us free,  
and *will* set us free:

whatever it takes - we are 'free indeed' (John 8.36)

We are A-Listers in the kingdom of God -  
those whom Jesus has liberated from bondage to sin and death

And we can do as that unnamed woman in the Gospel did:

*'Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God'*  
(Luke 13.13).