

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> August 2019**  
*Isaiah 58: 9 - 14; Luke 13: 10 - 17*

Somewhere on the road between Galilee and Jerusalem on the Sabbath, Jesus and his travelling companions came to a synagogue. They entered to worship, and perhaps because Jesus' fame or notoriety preceded him, he was invited to preach – to read from the Bible and to teach something about its meaning - by the President of the Synagogue.

And, (the reading from our Gospel says), 'There was a woman ... She was bent double and quite unable to stand up straight.'<sup>1</sup> Jesus had noticed this bent-out-of-shape woman, but it wasn't the only bent-out-of-shape thing he had noticed. He had noticed that in this synagogue, led by this President, on this Sabbath, the congregation's understanding of the Bible was bent out of shape; their understanding of the religious Law was bent out of shape, and – it would transpire - the President of the synagogue himself, along with a group described simply as Jesus' opponents, were bent out of shape.

If you have ever felt that you, or your life, or the world around you – your church, your family, your community, your country - is in some way, 'bent out of shape,' and in need of straightening, then this story from the Gospel of Luke is the story for you. After all, as John the Baptist had proclaimed before Jesus had even been baptised or tempted in the desert, "... 'A voice is crying aloud in the wilderness, "Prepare a way for the Lord; clear a *straight* path for him.'"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus regularly went to church, to the synagogue. He took worship seriously, and he participated. It was in a synagogue, following his baptism and temptations, that – as far as the Gospel of Luke is concerned – the public drama of Jesus' life began; there he began his work of straightening-up the crooked things, that John had demanded people do, but which no one had got around to doing.

He didn't undertake this work surreptitiously: he announced he was going to straighten-up the crooked things; he told people what he thought was crooked and what he thought needed straightening; and he told people why he thought he was the man to do it.

On his first appearance in a synagogue, after his baptism and temptations, Luke writes that he '... opened the scroll and found the passage which says, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'"<sup>3</sup>

On the Sabbath we read about this morning, in that President's synagogue, that was what he did. He announced good news to the poor, proclaimed release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; he let the broken victims go free.

The reaction of the President to this work was indignation, Luke says. And the reaction of those termed his opponents was confusion, Luke says. This was not new. Indeed, Jesus was used to worse. Back at the beginning of his ministry when he first went in to a synagogue and proclaimed that message about the spirit of the Lord being upon him to release prisoners, to recover the sight of the blind, and let the broken victims go free, Luke says that, 'At these

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13: 11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3: 4

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4: 18 - 19

words the whole congregation were infuriated. They leapt up, threw him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill ... meaning to hurl him over the edge.'

There were many reasons why Jesus went to church: to pray; to teach; to read the Bible; and when he did, he always did those things with a sense of purpose. Worship had a sense of purpose, and it was to straighten things out; to address the needs of those who were bent out of shape. But, when he went to church with this sense of purpose, to do these things, he caused trouble, lots of it, 'I have come to bring division.'<sup>4</sup>

Jesus straightened out that woman. She had been crippled for eighteen years. Everyone thought that she was possessed by a spirit. But, she came to church anyway, even though there was nothing anyone could do for her. What must that have been like, being a crippled woman, in a man's world, possessed by a spirit that no one understands?

Jesus released her from her prison and straightened her up. But, then Jesus discovered, she discovered, and we discover that her disability was not the thing that was imprisoning her after all! Straightening her back should have made everything okay, it should have made everyone happy. But, it didn't; it made a lot of people angry.

It turned out that the bars of her prison weren't physical, they were spiritual – as Luke points out. She had been possessed by a spirit, and still was, a spiritual attitude, amongst those who held power, of placing rule-keeping above caring, of making exceptions for animals, but not for people. Never mind asking what it must have been like to live with an imprisoning back condition that bent you double, what must it have been like to live in a society that imprisons people with rule-keeping in such a way that - disability or no disability, illness or no illness, bereavement or no bereavement - even in church, in the presence of God, you have no chance of release, no feeling of love, no opportunity to be yourself, no respect for your worth as a human being, treated worse than an animal.

That is a society, a law code, a religion, a President bent out of shape, and in need of straightening. They were so bent out of shape that when Jesus tried to straighten them out, not only was the President indignant, but, Luke says this, '...all Jesus opponents were covered in confusion...'

What were they confused about? They were confused about this. Jesus said to them, 'What hypocrites you are ... Is there not a single one of you that does not loose his ox or his donkey from the manger and take it out to water on the Sabbath? And here is a woman, a daughter of Abraham, who has been kept prisoner by Satan for eighteen long years: was it wrong for her to be freed on the Sabbath?'

Jesus confused them – these rule-keepers - because they couldn't work out whether they were being told that they should accept the healing of people on the Sabbath because they let their animals drink water, or whether, because they wouldn't allow the healing of people on the Sabbath, then they should stop taking their oxen and donkeys to the manger to drink on the Sabbath. They were confused; they couldn't work out whether they should set people free, as they did their animals, or force their animals to suffer, as they did people.

And Jesus didn't let their inhuman confusion off lightly, '... here is a woman ... who has been kept been kept prisoner by *Satan* for eighteen years,' he said. Who is he calling Satan, do you think? Who had been keeping her prisoner for eighteen years?

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 12: 51

This wasn't the only time that Jesus did this sort of work of straightening up the crooked, in places like synagogues. In the gospel of Mark it says that, '...he went to a synagogue. There was a man with a withered arm; and they were watching to see whether Jesus would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they could bring a charge against him. Jesus said, "Stretch out your arm." He stretched it out and his arm was restored.'<sup>5</sup>

And again, in Mark, it says, 'Jesus went through the whole of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.' Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke it says, 'In Capernaum he went into a synagogue and healed a man who was possessed by a demon.' Who were all those demons?

For Jesus the place of prayer was always a place of healing – spiritual healing, liberation, release from the power of demons and Satan. And those who held sway over people's spirits did not like that. When Jesus healed that man in Mark with the withered arm, Mark says that, 'the Pharisees on leaving the synagogue, began plotting against him with the partisans of Herod to see how they could make away with him.'<sup>6</sup>

Jesus did this work of liberation too in the big synagogue in Jerusalem, the Temple. This is what the Gospel of Matthew says, 'In the temple blind men and cripples came to him, and he healed them. The boys in the temple were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' The chief priests and doctors of the law saw the wonderful things he did, and heard the boys shouting, and they were indignant.'<sup>7</sup> That word again, indignant.

On the other hand, some people liked what he was doing – the boys in the temple, for example, who were singing 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' They were delighted. And not just them. In our Gospel reading this morning, at the very end, after Luke tells us about the confusion of Jesus' opponents, he writes, '... the mass of people were delighted at all the wonderful things he was doing.' Those who held power over people hated Jesus, those people who had little power, loved him.

Jesus went to church regularly. He read the Bible, he prayed, he took a leadership position. In his words and with his actions he showed that faith and worship are about individuals together bringing before God not just our souls, but everything about them – our physical selves, our spiritual selves, our moral selves, our economic selves, our intellectual selves. We come here to worship together feeling happy and joyful, feeling busy or tired, feeling angry or upset. We come together, as individuals, to form a congregation, often with broken spirits, in pain, suffering, fearful, rejected and cast out, to receive liberation within the community of the children of God, as sons and daughters of Abraham.

What God wants for us on a Sunday morning when we come to worship, in whatever way we come, is that together as a congregation, we become the body of Jesus Christ on earth today announcing good news to the poor, proclaiming release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, letting the broken victims go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

If we, together as a congregation, the body of Christ on earth do this, then we shall feel like the delighted crowd in that President's synagogue felt after Jesus had straightened everyone out, or as those boys in the Temple felt when they sang Hosanna after Jesus healed people there, or like the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we read this morning, proclaim,

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 3: 1, 2, 5

<sup>6</sup> Mark 3: 6

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 21: 14 - 16

'... call the sabbath a day of joy, and the Lord's holy day a day to be honoured. If you honour it,' says Isaiah, 'by not plying *your* trade, not seeking *your own* interest or attending to *your* affairs, then *you*' – then you – 'shall find *your* joy in the Lord.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 58: 13 - 14