

## Called, loved, healed and rejoicing - 22 August

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

O Lord we pray, speak in this place in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts; and may the words of our lips and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

There are many stories in the scriptures of Jesus healing the sick. I believe that this repetition brings home to us both the healing power of God and also the fullness and integrity of life in relationship with God. We are called to joy and fulfilment and we are healed of the things that inhibit us from hearing or following that call. Many of those things are not physical conditions.

As well as the reinforcement of the message in the many stories of healing, each message has something different to offer. We need the consistent message of love and salvation. We also need to hear the rich diversity, depth and complexity of this message. Let us together look more closely at some of the particularity of today's gospel message about one woman and her encounter with Jesus.

Today's gospel message is about a healing in the synagogue, not in the street. Verse 10 gives us the setting, both time and place. *On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues.* Jesus healing power is brought to the centre of attention on the Sabbath in the synagogue, among those who sought to follow God's will and live in relationship with God including those who believed themselves to be god-fearing and righteous. Moreover, Jesus wasn't just attending the synagogue. He was teaching in the synagogue. Attention was being paid to what he was saying. To heal the woman in this context was a powerful statement.

Verse 11 tells us about the one who was healed. *A woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.*

Firstly, this was a woman. Jesus healed both men and women. We do not know a lot about this woman – who she was, how old she may have been, or anything about her life except that she was in the synagogue and had been crippled by a spirit, bent over, unable to straighten up for eighteen years.

*<sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."*

Unlike others who sought healing she didn't cry out to Jesus or seek to touch him; her friends or family members didn't beg Jesus to help her. This healing was on Jesus' initiative. He saw her, called her forward and told her that she was set free from her infirmity.

*<sup>13</sup>Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.*

When Jesus laid his hands upon the woman in today's gospel story she was taken from suffering to joy and thanksgiving.

This joy was not shared by the synagogue ruler.

*<sup>14</sup>Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."*

This was the attitude of the synagogue ruler, not of the people. He was indignant on behalf of the law. He revered the law deeply but did not extend this attitude to the healing of suffering. It is interesting that he did not rebuke Jesus but the people who might seek healing on the Sabbath.

*"There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."*

Healing was seen as work, not as a gift of grace.

The woman did not need to answer the ruler as Jesus answered for her, and in a way that encompassed all who shared the synagogue ruler's attitude.

*<sup>15</sup>The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?"*

*<sup>16</sup>Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"*

Jesus describes the woman as a daughter of Abraham, a term of honour and respect that depicts her as faithful and righteous. In her illness, she was not being punished by God but was bound by Satan.

In scripture, there are often echoes that bring to mind other passages. The woman's eighteen years of suffering is mentioned twice, once at the beginning of the story and again in the words of Jesus, echoing the passage immediately before this in Luke's gospel, when Jesus says that the eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them were no more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem.

The eighteen years and the eighteen who died are not a direct match but one does bring to mind the other which speaks of suffering that is not a sign of any particular guilt. Indeed, we know that the woman Jesus healed was attending synagogue despite her physical infirmity, and Jesus called her a daughter of Abraham.

So, says Jesus, if you would bring your animals to water on the Sabbath, should this woman, this daughter of Abraham, not be set free on the Sabbath?

*<sup>17</sup>When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.*

This was not just an act of healing but a divisive act that sorted Jesus' opponents from his supporters, or as the passage says, his opponents were humiliated but the people were delighted.

All those who witnessed the woman's healing in the synagogue were there to honour God. Their faith was important in their lives, as our faith is important in our lives. That is why we are here today.

Can we picture ourselves in the synagogue with Jesus that day? We would have seen some people who expressed their faith through obedience to the law, to God's commandments.

And we would also have seen some people in the synagogue who also expressed their faith through love and compassion. They, and we, are commanded to love God and to love one another. We need to be both challenged to show both obedience and love.

What happens when the two are in conflict? Then we need to see clearly the core of our faith. Is our faith primarily characterised by conformity, like that of the synagogue ruler, or by love and compassion like that of the people who were delighted by Jesus actions?

Jesus said that on the love of God and the love of our neighbour hang all the law and the prophets. They are the underpinning principles. The prophets often warned when love was lacking. Amos (Ch 5) told how God hated the feasts, assemblies and offerings made by those who failed to act with justice and righteousness. They followed regulations but lacked love and compassion. God did not say, "Give me greater conformity to the law" but "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

I would hope that we could be like those in the synagogue who, when it came to the crunch, valued love and compassion over conformity to the rules. Both matter, but love matters more. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans,

*Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:10).*

Can we also picture ourselves as the woman whom Jesus healed? She was called from her suffering, loved, healed and moved to praise and thanksgiving.

Are we bent down by burdens and troubles? Like that honoured daughter of Abraham, we also can turn to Jesus and find love, compassion and healing. Jesus said *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* (Matt 11:28, NRSV)

We can be confident that God responds to our needs with love and compassion.

As it says in today's psalm *Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.* (Ps 71:3)

Let us pray:        Loving God, when we are weary and bend with care, we pray that like the woman in the synagogue, we may experience the joy and love of Jesus in our lives, and praise and worship you with thanksgiving, reverence and awe.    **Amen**