

Readings for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

21st August 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking, for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Gospel: St Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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.' 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? 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?' 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.

A Reflection for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

In the twenty years in which I have been living in the north-west Highlands, the roads have been improved enormously. Many are now 2-lane roads and, if there's not too much traffic, I find it can be very pleasant sweeping along the open road and enjoying the scenery. And then there are the single-track roads with a charm all of their own. I enjoy them too, but I am sure I am not alone in finding that, especially at this time of year, they can be quite tedious. You can trail along for miles behind a camper van as it creeps cautiously round the bends and tries to negotiate other vehicles in the passing places. 'Can you not read?' I grumble as we pass the third sign that instructs drivers to 'Use passing places to permit overtaking.'

In my self-righteous frustration, I conveniently forget the rules that I sometimes bend – the times when I've left a little too late and that sweeping open road tempts me to drive a little faster than I ought. In the words of today's Gospel, Jesus could easily say to me 'You hypocrite!' He doesn't mince his words does he? 'You hypocrite!'. And yet, dare I say it, we've all been there. We've all criticised others and conveniently forgotten our own shortcomings.

But today's Gospel is more than a warning against self-righteousness and an admonition not to judge others.

In this story, Jesus was breaking all the traditions and conventions of the synagogue, even before he healed the crippled woman. Jesus, a Jewish male, was teaching in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, and he broke off from that important task to take public notice of a woman – he made the move, she didn't seek his attention. Not just a woman, but a crippled woman – in a culture in which disability was considered a punishment for sin, so she would have been ostracised by society. She was described as having a spirit – towards the end of the passage Jesus describes her as 'bound by Satan'. And then he touched her – risking ritual defilement. It was all so wrong.

And it was the synagogue leader's responsibility to maintain decorum, to maintain the reading and teaching of the law. Sabbath observance was an increasingly important part of Jewish identity in that period. His job was to uphold the rules. But Jesus was having none of this.

After the stinging rebuke 'You hypocrites!', Jesus points out that they watered their animals on the Sabbath. Under the Law, animals were not permitted to work on the Sabbath either, yet as an act of compassion they would untie them and lead the animals to water, rather than make them thirst until the next day. And if an animal can be unbound on the Sabbath, if the rules can be bent for an animal, how much more should that be possible as an act of compassion for one of God's children. The Sabbath recalled the Exodus, the freeing of the God's people from slavery in Egypt; liberation was at the heart of Sabbath worship, so what could be more appropriate than the freeing of this woman, this daughter of Abraham, from her disability on the Sabbath. Jesus was not saying that the rules don't matter, but sometimes they need to be interpreted differently, to be tempered with mercy and compassion.

This scene in the synagogue recalls an earlier one – the occasion in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus public ministry, where he read from the scroll of Isaiah 'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ...

to let the oppressed go free.’ In today’s story, that is exactly what Jesus did – he freed the crippled woman from her ailment. She was no longer captive; she recognised the work of God and her response was to praise God.

Ironically, the synagogue leader was not free. His blinkered vision did not see the woman for who she was, or allow him to see the presence and work of God in Jesus. He was too concerned with preserving the order of the Law to have compassion; he tried to get others on side and, as it says in the last verse, was put to shame.

Jesus was fulfilling his mission in the world. He came to transform the world, to change it for the better, to deliver people from bondage and to bring freedom. And, as God’s people down the ages, we are called to continue that work in the world in our own time.

In the passage from Jeremiah, we heard of Jeremiah’s call to be God’s prophet. He was a somewhat reluctant prophet: ‘Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy’ he said. Reluctance is a common response to the divine call. As I read somewhere recently, for every Isaiah who responds ‘Me! Me! Send me!’ there are several Moses’ saying ‘Have you considered my brother? He’d be much better.’ Reluctance is understandable, we don’t feel adequate to do God’s work; and it is difficult to discern God’s voice amongst the clamour of the false prophets – there are plenty of those now as there were in Jeremiah’s time, telling people what they want to hear. Nevertheless, despite his reluctance, Jeremiah’s role would be to tell people that things were going to change.

Prior to the coming of Jesus, people experienced God’s presence through smoke, fire, tempest, trumpets, as the passage from Hebrews tells us, and yet they largely ignored the prophets, broke the covenant and generally failed to live up to expectations. In some ways perhaps little has changed; our news bulletins in recent weeks have been full of smoke, fire and tempest, if not trumpets, and we still largely ignore the implications. Then the passage from Hebrews goes on; ‘But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God...’ - a place transformed by Jesus. As the writer says ‘See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking.’

We are all called to continue Jesus’ transforming work in the world today, to proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free. So how do we go about that?

As we look around the world today, it’s not too difficult to identify people who are in bondage of some sort. We speak of people trapped by war or poverty or addiction, and some people will indeed be called to address such huge issues or to contribute in some way. But at a much more everyday level, there are people around us who are trapped by things like loneliness, frailty, illness, caring responsibilities, or by having their views marginalised or ignored. Who could you or I extend the hand of friendship to, help with some simple task or give a voice to?

Closer to home, in some ways, we ourselves are in bondage to our own self-importance, our busyness, our prejudices, our likes and dislikes. To return to where I started, when I get frustrated with camper vans on single track roads, I am in bondage to those frustrations. The camper van driver is probably more concerned about the drop off the side of the road than the sign about permitting overtaking that may also be in a foreign language. A little compassion on my part would be better for both of us.

It is when we extend that hand of friendship, when we accede to a stranger’s request that upsets our busy, self-important schedule, when our prejudices are challenged by a friend’s story, it is then that we bring God’s freedom to others and experience it ourselves. It is then that we are continuing Jesus’ transforming work in the world.