Follow the pattern Jesus sets

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Pentecost + 11C Isaiah 58 9b-14, Ps 103 1-8, Heb 12 18-29, Lk 13 10-17

We are all baptised into a royal priesthood; a priesthood of service. The blessing at our baptism sets out the terms of our service; *strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; give honour to **all**; love and serve the Lord.* All of us are called to this work. By doing it, we express the **breadth** of God’s love and kindness – it’s something we learn from watching Jesus at work.

And we just saw him at it in the gospel today. Jesus is at Synagogue. He sees *a woman with a spirit which had crippled her for eighteen years.* He sees her and calls her over; he declares her release; touches her, and suddenly she’s free.

We met her as a hostage to her condition – held to ransom by a spirit which had crippled her. Now we see her released. Naturally, we – or any normal person – should rejoice at her deliverance. So we’re shocked by the reaction from the Leader of the Synagogue (ἀρχισυνάγωγος). I don’t think he truly represents his people. He sounds more like one of those sad people you meet sometimes who are obsessed with control over their little power base. And they often manage to create a one-person bureaucracy to protect it.

Sadly, like many such people can, this Leader of the Synagogue has developed quite a bit of control over the regular congregation. We see him play to the gallery: *… he kept saying to the crowd, ‘Come on the other six days to be cured – not the Sabbath’*. But he doesn’t have that authority. He’s not a rabbi / teacher. He’s somewhere between a verger and a master of ceremonies. He manages the physical arrangements of the

synagogue's worship; he may choose who does the readings. It's a serious ministry role, but he's lost the plot somehow.

As he plays to the gallery, his cronies must be nodding; people who might like him to choose them as readers, or for other prominent roles. We can guess this because Jesus doesn't respond to the Leader of the Synagogue, but to the people the LoS is appealing to. *You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey … and lead it to … water?* There is wriggle-room in rules, and for good reasons. Hebrew Law has many nuances.

In Hebrew theology, there are two **complementary** emphases on the significance of keeping Sabbath. *(I owe this insight to Em Prof Charles Raynal.)* These are expressed in the two versions of the commandment to keep the Sabbath – the one in Exod 20.8-11, and the other in Deut 5:12-15.

Exodus placed its emphasis on the seventh day of creation; Gen 2.2-3; we rest because God rested. But in Deuteronomy, your slaves and animals should keep Sabbath because God rescued you Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. So keeping Sabbath – imitating God in that sense – means passing on that freedom. So holy acts of justice – particularly freeing people – were appropriate to the Sabbath.

So there was a different, but complementary emphasis on Sabbath observance between Jesus and some people in the synagogue? For Jesus, the Law is first about grace, not propriety; justice, not who's right; release, not captivity.

Jesus is not alone among Jewish ethicists. In Lev 25, we find the call for a time of release from bondage in the Sabbath year – the year of release from debt and captivity – when birthrights given as surety on loans were restored. This woman's healing from the spirit that cripples her is her Sabbath release. So as Jesus teaches, healing her on the Sabbath was absolutely appropriate. The crowd is convinced and

rejoices with her. Jesus taught the crowd – not the leader of the synagogue. They could be brought to the light.

This story reminds us that the struggle which has been wracking the Anglican Communion and the Anglican Church of Australia for decades – our widely-publicised debate over what Scripture actually says about human sexuality – that this debate over *what is right* is no new thing. This dispute in our gospel over an appropriate interpretation of the law about the Sabbath is a helpful parallel.

Many Christians desire the clarity and simplicity of definite black and white rules; to know the difference between right and wrong. And many Christians find Jesus' choice to prioritise justice and compassion to be their guide when making their own choices. That difference is a point of contention in our church and in many others. The way we manage that contention with each other is our witness to the wider community. Jesus prayed that we might be one – in order that the world might believe. [Jn 17.20-21] How we manage our dispute is critical to God's mission.

Our role as members of the royal priesthood is to follow the pattern Jesus sets. As we saw today, when he's challenged, Jesus calls for compassion and integrity to return to hearts that have been hardened.

We should do what Jesus does, and like him, work for justice, mercy and faith; the things he called the weightier matters of the Law. [Mt 23.23] Then I believe we will do our bit for answering his prayer that we might be one. Amen.