

Jesus, the renovator

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Pentecost + 11C : Jrm 1 4-10, Lk 13 10-17

We're constantly renovating and upgrading things around the parish. Naturally, we Anglicans do that reluctantly. You know the one about how many Anglicans it takes to change a light bulb? All of them; one changes it, and everyone else reminisces about how good the old one was. But one of the frustrating things about renovating is that you go through storms of dust and weeks of inconvenience only to emerge at the end with something that looks normal – something that looks no better than how it should.

But that's not necessarily so bad. Today, we saw Jesus, the renovator. He laid healing hands on a woman and set her free from a crippling ailment so she could just be the way she should have been for the last eighteen years. We see this happen, we don't think; 'Well big deal, she only looks normal now!' No, we marvel. Or maybe we're a bit wistful; 'Why couldn't it happen for our friend?' But one person in the story doesn't see a woman restored to her God-given form; far from being inspired, all the leader of the synagogue can feel is outrage that she was healed on the Sabbath.

There's none so blind as those who won't see. The leader of the synagogue doesn't get that this woman's been released from her burden on just the *right* day. The real offence against the Sabbath would have been to let her keep on struggling under the burden of her illness. That Sabbath, Jesus set the woman free from her burden of life as painful drudgery – as work; a life where simply doing what passed for normal was hard work. Jesus set her free to be the woman she truly was. And immediately, she showed *who* she truly was by leading the Sabbath worship. 13.¹³... immediately, she stood up straight and

began praising God.'

Psalm 22.³ says God dwells in the praises of the people. When she praised God, this healed woman's praises revealed that God lived inside her. She was truly God's daughter. Her truest self was now plain to her and to all with eyes to see.

She's God's child; her joy reveals the family resemblance. And rediscovering God living in her sets her soul free to rest – to truly Sabbath in company with God who dwells inside her. But at that same moment, the leader of the synagogue unwittingly breaks the Sabbath. He sets to *work* defending a nit-picking legalism that closes him off from the true blessing of the Sabbath. It's an idol to him because it blinds him spiritually. He can't see God in the woman's healing.

Don't get me wrong; he's a very faithful man – following the Law to the letter as he understands it. But he shows us that there's danger as well as blessing in religious discipline. Properly used, disciplines like *Sabbathing* – stopping to open ourselves to God – can lead to spiritual growth. But imposed obsessively and legalistically, they can enslave people. What should be faithful behaviour becomes driven and neurotic.

A *true* spiritual discipline – fasting from food, from speaking, from only finding life's meaning in work – connects us with creation; with people; connects us with God; gives us a life lived in communion. But a simple twisting of the reason for a spiritual discipline can make it a soul-destroying work; something that builds a barrier between ourselves and God; between ourselves and our neighbours.

We see two different responses to God in this story. Both are intended as faithful responses. But their difference tells us that responding to God isn't without its ambiguities. The woman who was healed seems unconsciously to have got it right, while the leader of the synagogue with all his good intentions and diligence seems to have got it completely wrong.

Our sense of God reaching out to us, calling us, also seems to be a variable experience. Hearing Jeremiah's clear call, we might grumble, 'If only I had a call that was so cut and dried, then I'd know what God wants me to do with my life!' But reading on into Jeremiah's life story, we'd probably be relieved it wasn't us. Anyway, we wouldn't be called to transform a whole nation; we're so small. ... But isn't that the sort of thing Jeremiah said? 'I don't know how...I'm only a child.'

I'm putting the cart before the horse today. I've talked about how you express God living in you once you've sensed God calling you to a special vocation. But I haven't talked about how you can be sure whether God has called you in the first place. I think it's worth putting this particular cart in view first though. Because we need to know that the best picture of God's call and a right response to that call is the release of the woman who'd been bent over for eighteen years. The best picture of how you might respond to God's call is the vision of her standing upright and praising God.

The old collect for peace in the Morning Prayer service has these words in it: *O God, the author and lover of peace ... whose service is perfect freedom.* We saw a woman today who proclaimed the kingdom of God as she responded to her unexpected new freedom. The Kingdom broke into her life and instantaneously, it broke forth from her in praise of God.

Just one thing about the Sabbath; it was ordained not just as a day of rest, but as a time when debts were to be forgiven; when people, animals and the very Earth were released from the obligation to work so that all could rest in God's perfect peace. On this Sunday when we pray especially for the eighty-million people in the world who experience life as exile, let this woman's liberation on the Sabbath – the time of release from burdens – let her praise be our inspiration. Jesus wishes these people's freedom; wishes them justice.

I said that renovation is frustrating: that it only makes things look normal. Well maybe normal is actually spectacular; maybe it's something to sing about. And if you and I experience good health, enough to eat—if you and I belong to a community that could make a difference, maybe God is reaching out to touch us, to get us to help extend the Kingdom, so others can stand up straight, and praise God, just because they can.

Amen