

## **Trinity X, August 21 2022**

Every Sunday presents me with the challenge of making a connection between something familiar to us and the gospel story. This story of conflict over healing on the sabbath - Jesus heals a badly crippled woman - reminds me of something rather funny which happened to me a long time ago when I was a school chaplain.

The school chapel service was after breakfast at 10 o'clock and ended before eleven. Afterwards, I would walk home to my flat near the cricket fields and go shopping for my lunch. The problem was that my neighbour's husband was against Sunday trading, which had recently become legal for supermarkets (you can tell how long ago this was!). So, I had to drive out to the local Waitrose supermarket and shop and then unload rather stealthily. If my neighbour was on the lookout, I would stoop and lope to my flat to avoid appearing to be carrying Waitrose carrier bags. It was quite an exercise as I am tall and clumsy.

As luck would have it, I often had to park in front of my neighbour's window rather than mine and so I would have to wave and be jolly during the exercise. It was a minor version of the conflict that we hear about this morning. He believed that Sunday trading was wrong. I did not and felt that I should be free to go out and find food for my lunch.

Now, Jesus was dealing with something much more serious. I was dealing with an unenforceable difference of opinion. Jesus was up against the authorities of the synagogue.

On a sabbath, when he was in a synagogue, Jesus healed a woman who had not asked for his help. Jesus had compassion on her, a woman who suffered, we assume, from extreme osteoporosis. She was very stooped. She couldn't look at anyone and ordinary life was impossible and had been so for half an adult lifetime – eighteen years.

The synagogue leader disapproved of Jesus' action and his initial question to Jesus was why he had chosen to do this 'work' on the sabbath, on which work was forbidden, when he could as easily have done it on another day of the week. On the face of it, this seems reasonable.

But Jesus knew that this was hypocrisy. This man and his friends were happy to untie their oxen or donkeys and lead them to water on the sabbath, surely just as much 'work' as Jesus 'untying' the woman from her terrible life-denying affliction. Jesus asks, therefore, why he should not free this woman from her infirmity on the sabbath.

Jesus argues that if it is acceptable to loose an animal from its bounds on the sabbath, surely it must be even more acceptable to loosen the bonds of the woman's illness on the sabbath (her bondage to Satan?).

This is a conflict of power, priorities and values. The leader of the synagogue is jealous of Jesus' authority – Jesus' ostensible power - over illness and his authority in argument. He believes that the priority is to follow the rules. He values the rules more than compassion.

The synagogue leader has appealed to the crowd but the crowd now murmur their approval of Jesus. So often they have been the victims of the application of petty rules by men like the synagogue leader and his privileged class.

This story may appear remote from our own world but there are insights about power, hypocrisy and compassion that remain relevant. Our experience of Covid and our rediscover of our interdependence give us one good example and, I fear, the coming experience of fuel crisis and recession will give us another.

As Covid struck, we had no vaccines and no other protection other than the strictest quarantine. We were prepared to have rules imposed upon us and there was general acceptance of the rules. Masks followed. Churches, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, etc. were closed. Eventually, masks were compulsory. But there was also compassion. In the US there were huge benefit cheques. In France there were furlough schemes. It wasn't perfect but there was sense of 'being in it together'.

How difficult it must be to lead in such times. At local level, this was hard enough. In Holy Trinity and St Hugh's, it was arduous to find the right balance – when to open again, how to open, when to sing, how to sing, etc.

But this was so much harder for the national leaders. They had to manage a series of quarantines and judge when to end them and later how to distribute vaccines effectively. They had power but they also had to show compassion.

Remember how people both respected the need to protect the vulnerable from infection but also that people regretted the separation from loved ones. Remember how difficult it was not to be able to have weddings or to have tiny numbers at funerals - numbers were limited even at the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh. This meant latterly that the public in the UK could not stomach the hypocrisy of their leaders who had flouted the rules they had imposed on others. There was fury when a party culture was revealed at the residence of the British Prime Minister.

The same gospel issues of power, hypocrisy and compassion – the stopped woman issues – will apply again this winter. Our governments – the ones who have power - cannot expect ordinary people to cope with rises in the cost of living, especially fuel costs, which they cannot afford, while they are unaffected personally. That is simply hypocrisy. The ones who make decisions are far wealthier than those who are affected by them. They are cushioned from the effects of their decisions. They can afford to pontificate about being opposed to ‘handouts’. If we were to re-run a sabbath morning scene with Jesus, they would not come off well. Far from being irrelevant, this morning’s story being from the past, it is of ageless significance. There is always someone in comfortable power prepared to ignore the suffering of someone vastly less well off and hide behind some system or convenient set of rules. Perhaps, we should sympathise with the murmuring crowd who had seen this sort of thing too many times before – as have we?