

Introduction

When I lived in Hackney there was a lady who used to catch the same bus as me and we often got on at the same stop. She clearly had advanced scoliosis of the spine and was bent almost entirely double. She walked with a stick and it was painful watching her getting onto the bus and finding a seat. She couldn't straighten at all and her life was very restricted. I always found it painful to watch her and often wondered what it must feel like to be so constrained.

Our Gospel reading is about someone who had a very similar problem. Luke tells us that she was bent over and couldn't straighten up at all, a condition she had suffered from for eighteen years and which seems to have some spiritual root - Jesus said that Satan had kept her bound for all that time. Whatever the case she was severely handicapped. Imagine what it must be like to spend most of your life looking at your toes, to find it difficult to look to left or right and not to be able to walk upright.

Someone in that condition would have a real excuse for not getting to church and yet she came to worship at the Synagogue. For her sickness was no excuse for staying away. In spite of her suffering and infirmity she came to the place where the Sabbath day and God's word were honoured and where God's people met together. It seems that it was really important to her to worship God and she wasn't going to let her condition prevent that.

She was sitting there in the congregation, presumably looking at the floor, but with no obvious expectation that she would be healed. She seems to have come to hear God's word and to be with his people. When Jesus saw her his response was one of compassion for her condition. He called her forward and with word and touch he healed her.

Hebrews 12:18-end**Luke 13:10-17**

He said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity". Then he put his hands on her and Luke tells us that immediately she straightened up and praised God. Jesus demonstrates in this miracle his power to heal but more than that his power to release people who are captive. He talks about the fact that Satan had kept her bound, she was restricted by more than her physical condition, yet both the spiritual and the physical were instantly healed by Jesus. He simply had to touch her and proclaim her healing and she straightened up. Her immediate response to finding that she was no longer deformed was to praise God. She recognised that it was his power that had set her free and she responded from a deeply grateful heart. She had come to worship and to be taught. Jesus had given her healing. Imagine her joy and astonishment. Imagine the depth of her thankfulness and praise.

Yet she wasn't the only person in the congregation who was locked. There were others who were bound mentally if not physically. They may have had freedom of movement but their vision and understanding were crippled. The ruler of the synagogue was twisted and imprisoned by his attitudes. His response to the woman's healing was the complete opposite of hers. She recognised God's hand at work and praised him. He saw that religious rules had been broken and he responded by reading the people a lecture, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

This man had lost his sense of the worth of humanity and lost his sense of the truth about God. He had lost any understanding of God as a loving Father who longs to heal his people and to set them free from all that holds them captive. This man's worship of God had become confined to a set of rules. He saw Jesus release a woman from years of suffering and bondage and instead of praising God for the wonderful miracle that had occurred he told the people that it wasn't

Hebrews 12:18-end

Luke 13:10-17

appropriate. There were six days for work but the seventh was for God so they should come and be healed on the other days but not on the Sabbath which had to be preserved at all costs.

For him the Sabbath had become something to be protected and preserved - but he had totally lost sight of the point of the Sabbath, which was for spending with God, and also, of God's nature and priorities. This man's religion had become a joyless subservience to a set of rules in which he had lost any understanding of the God he said he served and any sense of the value of human beings.

God's first priority is that we should become whole and in a close relationship with him. For him that means dealing with the sin and failure that holds us captive and bringing healing to the physical infirmities and emotional hurts that prevent us being the people that he has created us to be.

This is a lady who clearly had many problems. Jesus said that she was held captive by Satan. He had attacked her with physical results, her body was bent and twisted, she was unable to move normally and daily life must have been very difficult for her. Satan's effect on her also had a spiritual dimension, she was probably oppressed in her Spirit which would have all sorts of repercussions on the way that she viewed herself, on her relationships with other people and the way that she coped with life in general.

Yet this is also a lady whose relationship with God was clearly an important element. She didn't let the difficulties she faced prevent her from coming to worship God and to learn more of him. She was prepared to make a great effort in order to come together with God's people on his day to worship with them and to share in fellowship with them.

Hebrews 12:18-end**Luke 13:10-17**

This is a lady who didn't allow her situation in life to become an excuse for not being committed to God, or a reason for staying at home on the Sabbath. She had determination and commitment and her priority was to worship God despite the effort it clearly cost her.

These are attitudes that God honours. Jesus saw her there, amongst the congregation worshipping with God's people and he had compassion on her state. He knew that she wanted to worship God and he met her in her situation and he brought her freedom and healing.

This is often how God works. He honours our commitment to him. He sees our hearts and when we make him and our worship of him a priority he meets us where we are. It is as we worship him, as we serve him as we are called to do that he honours us and brings us healing of our bodies, minds and spirits and that he releases us from the things that bind us and oppress us.

Are there things that oppress us and bind us, whether it is a physical illness or disability, an emotional hurt, or some spiritual problem that we struggle with? Do we allow these things to prevent us from worshipping God? Do we make our problem an excuse for not honouring our Lord or do we make our worship of our heavenly father and the fellowship with his people a priority?

It is as we obediently give him the worship and service that he deserves from us that we will meet with him - and often that will be when we least expect it, when we are simply going about his business, worshipping him and honouring him; it is then that he will meet with us to bring healing and release from the things that bind us.

Hebrews 12:18-end

Luke 13:10-17

The synagogue ruler.

This is a man who appeared to be serving God. He was the ruler of the synagogue, a religious person whose job was to worship God, to teach others and to help others to meet with God.

Yet this was also a man who had almost entirely lost sight of who God was and what serving him really meant. This was a man whose faith had become a set of rules, whose attitudes bound him and gave him an extremely narrow view of who God was and how he wanted to work in people's lives. This is a man who had become crippled by his attitudes and bound by very narrow vision. He had a rigid expectation of how God should be served and how God would work and it left no room for compassion for others or for recognising when God worked in his own way.

It is easy to criticise the synagogue ruler and the attitudes displayed by the Pharisees in the Gospels. Yet we need to be careful that we too are not like them. It is easy for our faith to become a sterile commitment to a set of rules. It is possible for us to become rigid in our thinking and to think that God will only work in the ways that we think suitable. We can all too easily limit his power in our lives by our attitudes to him and to others.

Is there anything that binds us? Are our attitudes to worship rigid and unyielding? Do we let our own preferences and our own priorities rule our thinking about how God should be worshipped and affect our compassion for others. Maybe we need to bring those attitudes and priorities to God today to allow him to unlock our hearts and minds and to give us the freedom of God's children.

Hebrews 12:18-end**Luke 13:10-17**

God's priority for us is that we should be whole people and in close relationship with him. What are the things that bind us and prevent us from enjoying that freedom to the full?