

Our gospel reading tells the story of Jesus healing the crippled woman – but the most significant thing at first looking, is the fact that he healed her on a Sabbath, and the synagogue ruler was, we are told, indignant!

So, let's have a look at what is going on through the three main characters of the story – they being, the crippled woman, the synagogue ruler, and, of course, Jesus.

So first the crippled woman. We are in a synagogue and “a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.”

[Pick someone] Would you play the part of the crippled woman for a moment please. So, first of all, we need to work out why you are here. No-one has asked you to come – it was clearly your choice. As far as we know you have been coming to the synagogue every week for all your life – but you can't stand upright. Would you mind just bending as if you can't straighten your back. What can you see? [wait for a reply]. Do you actually feel part of what is going on then? No. But still you came. [She can stand up now]. Clearly you are committed to worshipping God – and then you saw Jesus and you asked him for help – actually no you didn't – because you probably couldn't see him, so what happened next was not due to something you had asked for at all. [She can sit down]

Let's now start looking at what Jesus is doing. [Select a Jesus]. So you have come to the synagogue because? Yes – it's the sabbath and you generally find a synagogue where you are and teach. This all started when you went into the synagogue in Jerusalem when you were there with your parents when you were 12 – and they left without you. But you weren't worried that they had gone were you? But then teaching in the synagogue hasn't always gone well has it? Do you remember the time when you went back to Nazareth, and the locals rejected you? That must have been tough.

But today you are being welcomed and then you see that poor crippled woman who was so bent that she couldn't see what was going on – and so you healed her straight away. But, you follow the laws of the Torah don't you – you are not allowed to work on the Sabbath and isn't this doing the work of a doctor? Surely you could have arranged to come back the next day to heal her? That must have been a hard decision – but I am guessing you didn't want her to suffer a day longer than necessary, even though she has been suffering for 18 years. But I'm also guessing not everyone agreed? [Sit down for a minute]

Let's meet our third character – the synagogue ruler. [pick someone]. So, I wonder what the most important thing about the synagogue is to you? Is it vibrant worship? Is it good teaching? Is it proper care for the children – because surely as synagogue ruler these are all your responsibility? Or is there something more important to you that you need to keep an eye on? I think you think there is – and that is that all the rules of the synagogue are followed strictly. No concessions. No excuses. So when Jesus healed the crippled woman you had no compassion for her at all did you? Jesus was breaking a rule – and so he shouldn't have done what he did. What was it you said to the people gathered around (as I am guessing that you thought Jesus might heal somebody else) – “There are six days for work. So come and be healed

on those days, not on the Sabbath.”? That’s was really a bit tough wasn’t it? Jesus had a real go at you and your team didn’t he?

“You hypocrites, he called you, and then convinced everyone else that as you did jobs on the Sabbath by caring for your animals, there was no difference with what he had just done. And everyone else agreed with Jesus. You must have been livid. [can sit down]

Looking at a story like that through the eyes of the characters concerned can, I hope, help us to understand what is going on, and what should be going on. And there are a number of important lessons that we can learn from what they experienced.

First, the importance of worship. The crippled woman must have had a really tough time getting to the synagogue, and then joining the worship when she got there. But still she came. She had no expectations of meeting Jesus or being healed – that was not why she was there – it was Jesus who spotted her, not the other way around. We are called to worship God regularly – and that is what we should do. And we mustn’t miss that short phrase in our story after Jesus had healed her. “she straightened up and praised God”.

Second, the knowing what is and what is not important. Yes, this story is all about what you do and what you don’t do on the sabbath. But we as churches can get ourselves tied up in knots over all sorts of things, and a lot of those things are caused by rules which people say are biblically based. The synagogue ruler said that Jesus should not heal on the sabbath, because the Torah, those first 5 books of what we now call the Old Testament, say you shouldn’t work on the sabbath. Interpreting what the bible means is often really hard and being aware of that is our second lesson.

On various days during the year the Church of England remember significant Christians from the past, and yesterday we remembered Bernard of Clairvaux. Not one of the most well known of people from the church’s history, Bernard was one of the great pioneers of monasticism, completely revitalising the Cistercian Order of monks. At the centre of what he introduced was a way of reading the bible called Lectio Divina, which meant divine reading. This approach requires the reader to really study a short piece of scripture for a long time to pick up the true meaning of that reading – perhaps taking a sentence or so and coming back to it at different times of the day. This approach leads us to various questions about how we approach the Scriptures?

Do I read them, or am I read by them?

Do I attempt to master them, or do I allow them to master me?

Do I believe that God is present as I read, and that He has a message for me?

Bernard said that meditating on the word strengthens us so that we can face the trials and burdens that are an inevitable part of human experience. However we choose to engage with the words we read in the bible, engage with them we must – or we, like the synagogue leader, may come away with the wrong message.

Our third lesson, in a rather strange way, by making a point about the rules of the sabbath – even though Jesus said they had misinterpreted those rules – is that this story does remind us that the sabbath exists, and that we should take note of it. Do you have a sabbath day in your week? Do you have a day when you stop doing the normal things of your life, and rest? I would say that we try and do that – even though it has taken us a long time to make Fridays our sabbath – but we don't always succeed. More and more these days the idea of Sundays being treated as a day of rest is being eradicated. Treating it as a day of rest doesn't mean to say that you shouldn't do anything, but overall it should be a day that refreshes you after the previous 6 days and before the next 6. Part of that refreshment can come by coming to church, but that's not always possible. Part of that refreshment can be visiting family – but then that is not always restful. What is important is that we respect that one day a week should be different from the rest – and don't forget that has been God's rule since the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis.

So let's finish by going back to those pictures, and how we identified that different people are born to do different things.

We heard that Jeremiah was born to be a prophet. We looked at whether 10 other people were born to do whatever it was that they turned out to be good at. But in this synagogue scene we have our three characters who we could say were born to do something – the crippled woman was clearly born to worship God – her healing would have helped her – but she was already worshipping God. The synagogue leader was born to run a church – it rather looks like he and his masters were making some mistakes in doing just that, but it could still be argued that the synagogue leader was doing what he was born to do. Whether we born to prophecy, whether we were born to worship (which of course we all were), whether we born to have some sort of leadership role in a church, we were all born to do something. Which is why recognising the diversity of our churches, the different roles we all have, is so important.

And Jesus – he was born to save us from our sins – and that he does each and every day.

And thank God for that.

Amen