

responding to God
a sermon preached on the
eleventh sunday after pentecost
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Isaiah 58: 9b-14; Psalm 103; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17

Today's Gospel story of the crippled woman is found only in Luke and it is typical of his writing. First of all, it contains a, 'Lukan triangle'; a story that involves Jesus, another principal character and a third party.¹ There are lots of these triangles in Luke's Gospel.

At the top of the triangle is Jesus. At the bottom on one side, is the other main character, a marginalised person, in need of salvation; in this case the woman with the spirit that has crippled her for eighteen years. In a Lukan triangle, the person in this corner appears to be the main focus of the interaction with Jesus. This is the person who is outcast from society in some way; who is in need of healing, transformation, conversion.

At the bottom of the triangle on the other side, is the third party; often described by Luke as *they*. In this case, *they* are Jesus' opponents, the leader of the synagogue and his supporters. The people in that corner of the triangle are the ones in whom Luke is most interested. *They* mutter and murmur against Jesus and whatever it is that he is doing. *They* are never happy with Jesus' actions. *They* are the self-righteous ones who criticize Jesus for breaking their rules. *They* seem unable to recognise what God is doing through Jesus.

Luke's triangles allow him to play with a question that fascinates him; who is most in need of healing, transformation, conversion? The people in this corner are seen by society as unimportant; poor, weak, outcast, marginalised, in need of healing. The muttering *they* are successful, powerful, the religious elite. And yet, over and over again, it is the ones who society overlooks who recognise what God is doing and who rejoice in God's actions while *they* try to spoil it all with envy, jealousy and a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the miracle taking place before them.

Who is most in need of healing, transformation, conversion? Throughout Luke's Gospel he is preoccupied with the human response to God. Again, and again God offers salvation. Some people receive it, but others reject it. Almost always, the ones who receive God are those who know the brokenness and limitations of their lives. The ones who reject God's offer are those who depend on their own resources and whose comfortable ways are threatened and disturbed by a God who, through Jesus, breaks the rules to set people free.

Another characteristically Lukan theme in this story flows from his interest in the human response to God. That is, that for Luke in particular, the proper response to God's activity is praise and joy. The woman whom Jesus frees from the crippling spirit immediately begins to praise God. This response shows that she understands that the gift she has been given could only have come from God and she responds with wholehearted enthusiasm.

¹ For a fuller discussion of Lukan triangles see, Brendan Byrne's *The Hospitality of God: A reading of Luke's Gospel*, p9.

Throughout Luke's Gospel the people who recognise the signs of God's action in the world respond with praise and joy; John the Baptist leaps with joy in his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's voice, Mary sings that her soul magnifies the Lord, and her spirit rejoices in God her saviour, the Samaritan cured of leprosy by Jesus praises God with a loud voice, and Zaccheus welcomes Jesus into his house with joy.

These are the people in this corner of Luke's triangle. They are the ones who have little or nothing, whose lives are diminished and limited by their circumstances, who are unimportant or despised from a human point of view. When God offers them freedom and new life they don't hold back! They know that God's realm is a place of freedom and rejoicing and they receive God's gift of a place there with gratitude and expressions of joy that cannot be silenced. For Luke, this joy is the marker by which we recognise the response of a faith-filled heart.

Down in the other corner of Luke's triangle, all is not well. The unstoppable joy and praise of a congregation in response to God is something that one could reasonably expect a religious leader to get excited about! And, after all, joy and praise of God is an important part of the Sabbath observation of the Jewish people. This is what should be happening! But the ruler of the synagogue is only focussed on observing the prohibition against working on the Sabbath. He has a narrow view of the law and a high opinion of his own importance. Jesus' action has upset both. Jesus is not following the rules and so the leader cannot see that God is at work through him, even when the fruits of God's action; freedom, healing, transformation, praise and joy, are right in front of his eyes.

It is easy to be critical of the leader of the synagogue and the sad irony of his angry response to Jesus' healing of the woman with the crippling spirit. But it is worth asking ourselves, how different are we? When God acts in ways that make us uncomfortable, do we find ourselves standing beside the vulnerable people in this corner, or are we more often aligned with those in the muttering, murmuring corner? Can we hear in this Gospel Luke's challenge to consider our own need for healing, transformation, conversion?

There is one other major Lukan theme in our Gospel reading for today. It is that of a changed or new perspective. The woman who was bent over can now stand tall and look at the world from literally, a new angle. God does not see as we see, God's thoughts and ways are different from ours. For Luke, the Gospel is not a matter of external behaviour but of a changed heart. Luke calls us to re-evaluate everything from God's perspective, to prefer humility to power, mercy to harsh justice, God's ways to human priorities.

It is easy for any of us to become so fixed in a habitual perspective that we do not register that there are other ways of seeing. God longs to set us free from the perspectives that cripple us and keep us looking at the ground. We can see this priority in the actions of Jesus. Setting a woman free from the spirit that was crippling her was important enough to him that he would break part of the Sabbath law. As followers of Jesus, we too are called to see the things that cripple life and to work to set people free, offering them a new perspective of hope because, sadly, injustice caused by narrow piety and fixed perspectives is alive and well in today's world.

For a long time, a narrow, fearful piety preferred that the lives of many people were crippled by the effects of child sexual abuse rather than have the church speak honestly of the shame of what was happening and act with courage to end it and offer redress to those who had suffered.

A rigid, narrow perspective on human sexuality means that LGBTQI people continue to be discriminated against and treated as second class citizens by a church unable to see the validity of love that doesn't look the way the heterosexual majority thinks it should.

I can hear Jesus saying, *You hypocrites! Ought not these people be set free?*

When God acts in our lives today, freeing us from the things by which we are crippled, we are given a foretaste of God's realm and the proper response for us too is joy. The leader of the synagogue in his narrow piety had forgotten the point of worship. We do not come to worship in order to look good to those around us or to impress other people like us by our ability to keep the rules. We come to worship to enter God's realm and to learn to live in God's ways so that we leave our worship better equipped to make God's realm present on earth.

This means that, as the body of Christ in this place, we are called to be a community characterised by the radical, life-giving, new perspective of God; a community that is known by joy, praise, whole-heartedness, and the renewal of hearts and lives. As we follow in this way, we will find our own healing, transformation and conversion, not once, but every day as we respond again and again to the God who sets us free.

Today's reading from the book of Isaiah says it like this;

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58: 9-10).

The Lord be with you.