

the woman bent double
a sermon preached on the
fourteenth sunday after pentecost
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by dr muriel porter

lections: Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

At first glance, today's Gospel about the crippled woman healed by Jesus looks to be a straight-forward healing miracle.

It is certainly that. The poor woman's condition is serious. For 18 years, she has been "bent over" and "quite unable to stand up straight". At the very least it was a debilitating condition, and possibly also very painful. Her quality of life would have been seriously compromised.

She does not approach Jesus. But she does not need to – he sees her and is obviously moved with compassion. Calling her over, he declares her free from her ailment and lays his hands on her. Immediately, we are told, "she stood up straight and began praising God". Imagine her joy, her relief, her gratitude! No wonder she began praising God!

It is also a story about the hardheartedness of the religious authorities, more concerned with petty rules than with releasing a suffering woman from her bondage. And with using those rules to condemn Jesus for his loving compassion. It is a telling example of the regular confrontation between the authorities' rigid rule-based religion and Jesus' loving Gospel priorities. The authorities were 'indignant' at Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, we are told, and it is clear that Jesus was also indignant – with them. "You hypocrites!" he declares.

This was a favourite story of the women's ordination movement. Here was a woman raised up after long years of being unable to stand tall, a symbol of female oppression. The religious authorities did not want to see her oppression lifted, but through Jesus' intervention, this 'daughter of Abraham' was at last able to stand upright in her true identity. We found great solace in that story, as you can imagine.

Yes, a great story for women, but there is much more to it. We know that few if any Gospel stories are a simple report of an historical event. There is much more going on here.

Last Sunday, as we celebrated the feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord, we saw in her revolutionary song and in her calling to bear the Christ-child powerful evidence of the kingdom of God come among us. The mighty would be cast down, she sang in the Magnificat, and the lowly would be raised up. The hungry would be fed, and the rich sent away unfilled. She herself, the Galilean peasant girl of no account raised up to be the Mother of God, was a powerful sign of the kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel, we see more evidence of that kingdom. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus had declared that he had been sent to 'proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'¹ Certainly that is what he was doing in that synagogue: proclaiming to the woman release from her captivity, freeing her from her oppression and in the process proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus' "freeing of the woman bent double actualizes the kingdom".² The kingdom of God came very near in that synagogue encounter.

This story is also about us. A couple of months ago our Vicar David made this point in a sermon – he said that "it always helps to ask the question: What has this text of Sacred

¹ Luke 4:18-19

² Robert F. Toole, 'Some Exegetical Reflections on Luke 13:10-17', *Biblica*, 73, no.1 (1992), p.93.

Scripture to do *with me?* here and now, in this life, at this time, at this place?” The Sacred Scripture, he said, “is timeless metaphor that empowers us, to reflect upon that direct revelation of the mystical Christ that is given to each of us... through the uniqueness of our experience.”³

So what does this woman represent for you? Have you had, or do you currently have, an experience of being bent low? Being unable to stand up straight, to be fully yourself? It might be a long-term physical ailment; an enduring grief or sadness; loss of a fulfilling job or role in life; a deep worry about family members; financial distress; a broken relationship; being misunderstood or unfairly maligned; or even feeling rejected.

Despite her terrible condition, this woman had nevertheless come to the synagogue to worship, presumably not expecting or looking for the healing Jesus would offer her. She came there just as she was. Jesus saw her plight, had compassion on her, and raised her up. The contrast with the irritated self-righteous, hypocritical ruler of the synagogue is very telling, isn't it?

This story brings to mind the parable Jesus told of the despised tax-collector and the self-righteous Pharisee who both went up to the temple to pray.⁴ The Pharisee, standing tall, gives thanks to God for his own righteousness, including his superiority over the tax-collector. But the tax-collector, Jesus said, “standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”⁵

Part of our culture as Anglicans has been to want to present ourselves to God as respectable. In my young days, as I am sure was the case for many of us, my mother would not have dreamt of sending me off to Sunday school or church except in my best clothes, with neat hair and shiny shoes. She would not have appeared in church herself without hat and gloves. This was symbolic of the assumption that we could only draw near to God as people who lived respectable, law-abiding lives. If for any reason we felt we were failures, we were inclined to keep away. It was why, as church surveys over the decades have told us, many divorced people, women who have had abortions, people in de facto relationships, gay people, and the poor and unemployed have over the years abandoned church-going. They felt themselves to be unacceptable.

We, as church, have so often been tempted to behave like the ruler of the synagogue in today's Gospel – to want things kept nice and respectable, to behave properly, and to obey the rules.

The Anglican Church in this country is not looking nice and respectable at the moment. We are currently “bent over and quite unable to stand up straight” as we hear the gruesome revelations of the church's failings over child sexual abuse. In fact, it has been the case for quite some time over this issue – for at least 18 years, we could say. Our reputation in the wider community is shot to pieces by these revelations, both of the abuse itself and the church's inadequate response to it. We are rightly slammed as hypocrites because the main message the community has heard from us are harsh, narrow rules about human sexuality.

The great danger now is that the church is struggling to protect what is left of its reputation rather than fully acknowledging its sinfulness. It is trying to stand up straight by its own misguided efforts. It is casting around for new scapegoats. But what it needs to do most is to humbly face up to its brokenness, and cry, “God, be merciful to us, sinners”.

That is the message to the church at large and to us personally of Jesus' parable of the tax-collector, and of the healing of the woman bent double. Both came to pray just as they were, without any attempt to present a glossy image of themselves, or to stand upright by their own efforts. The woman possibly could not physically even look up to face Jesus as he called

³ Father David Moore, ‘It's about us’, a sermon preached on Pentecost 3, 5 June 2016. http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/sites/default/files/inline/files/Pentecost_3.pdf

⁴ Luke 18:9-14

⁵ Luke 18: 13-14

her to him, like the tax-collector who would not look up to heaven. Both went home 'justified' – lifted up, raised up, by God.

So whatever it is that is bowing you down, come just as you are to the Lord's table this morning, trusting in the Lord's loving compassion. Nothing more is needed.

muporter@trinity.edu.au