

St Brandon's Brancepeth 25 August 2019

Isaiah 58:9b – end, Hebrews 12:a8 – end, Luke 13:101-17

Introduction, thank you etc. Missioner in Sheffield Diocese....moved to Doncaster...no church to look after, so had to ask the question, Is there something I can be doing 'hands on'...I did some fact finding about what was going on in Doncaster and discovered there was red light district....with about 175 girls 'working' it, most of whom were under 16, and most of whom were addicts....I decided that before I set myself up as the saviour of Doncaster's prostitutes (!) I ought to find out if anyone else was doing anything among them – and yes – two women who worshipped at the Pentecostal church were. They had been walking past these girls into church, and one day looked at each other and said 'What can we do? We can't keep walking past these girls, who are children, and look our Father God in the face in worship.' They knew nothing about prostitution and nothing about drugs, so (like the women in another Gospel story), 'they did what they could'. They made up two large flasks of coffee and starting going out to the girls, saying 'It's a cold night and we've bought you a hot drink.' They basically *mothered* them. And from those beginnings, they now have a little shop front, where the girls can drop in, get advice and support and a cuppa and get help if they want to come off the 'game' as they call it. And some of them have come to faith.

Now there was something good going on about that worship in that Pentecostal church. 'We can't walk past those girls, and look our Father in the face....What are we to do...?' For those two women, there was, what we might call, *integration* between the worship and the life, between the inner and the outer.

Now it seems clear that what Jesus found in the synagogue that day when he visited and healed the woman with scoliosis was a sort of *dis-integration* between what we might call 'liturgy and life'. Let's remind ourselves of the main points of the story –

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and visits a local synagogue on the Sabbath. We assume he was invited to teach by the leader of the synagogue, who had responsibility for organising the synagogue services, the readings, the recitation of the psalms and the prayers. Jesus was in the middle of teaching when a woman enters who has a deformity of the spine – possibly due to tuberculosis or spondylitis. Anyway, she was bent over and could not stand upright. Jesus stops his teaching and calls her over, proclaiming her free of her ailment. Then he lays his hands on her and she stand ups straight and begins to praise God. Notice, Jesus doesn't wait for her to ask for healing (which is the normal pattern) – he initiates it. Can you imagine being that woman? Basically coming to church on a normal day, and going away free from an infirmity which she had had for 18 years! And her neighbours, all around her, see it. Everyone there is amazed. Who wouldn't be?

Now the leader of the synagogue is not a happy man! Was it a bit of a threat to his leadership? 'There are six days on which work ought to be done: come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath'. It is a delightfully human response, isn't it? A fit of the sulks, really. But it also betrays a misunderstanding about the Torah, the law which we know as the Ten Commandments, and the place of the Sabbath which of course is included in the 'law'. And that's what Jesus picks up.

'You hypocrites! You will loose an animal from the stall to give them a drink on the Sabbath – so oughtn't, this woman whom Satan has kept bound 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath?' Now it's interesting that Jesus calls the leader and those who support his view, hypocrites. Because the word hypocrites implies play-acting. Covering up. Pretence. And what it really denotes is the human capacity, which we all have, for living in segments. In boxes. So that one bit of ourselves is happy to do one thing, while another bit seems totally untouched or unaware of it.

Don't we all know this? I can be terribly judgemental about people, while at the same time, doing something similar or the same as them! AND moreover, the bit of me that's 'judging' and the bit of me that's doing the same thing can be totally unaware of each other! This sort of dis-integration between parts of ourselves is part of the dis-ease of the human person. I guess we would say one of the fruits of 'The Fall'. What the leader of the synagogue and so many of Jesus adversaries had lost sight of was the *reason why* the Sabbath was important. '*What it was really for and about*'. The Sabbath had been pushed into 'the religious box' and it had become a straitjacket, a burden not a freedom, bearing little relation to the rest of life. Now Jesus wasn't out to destroy the Sabbath – as the leader of the synagogue seemed to fear. Jesus was clear that he came not to destroy the Law but to fulfil it. He's trying to get it out of the religious box and back into life!

And as with the synagogue, so with the Church – there can be a deep rift between what happens in the liturgy and what we say and sing on a Sunday and the rest of our lives, even when we are sincere Christians. But fortunately, as with the women in Doncaster, the Holy Spirit begins to find a way in which the water of the Spirit starts seeping through our barriers and into the rest of our lives! He is the Spirit of integration, of healing. Church and Life should not be two things, but one.

And we can see this journey towards integration in our other two readings. Again in Isaiah 58 we see the integration between our liturgical words and actions and our lives. People are questioning 'Why do we fast, but you don't notice, God?' God speaks: Is this the fast I choose: bowing your head and lying down in sackcloth? Isn't the fast I choose to share your bread with the hungry? Look – he goes on – if you stop speaking ill, pointing the finger, offer your food to the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted – then your light shall rise.' You will be healed. You will find renewal. Your gloom will be like the noonday. Your depression will lift. The Lord will guide you and you will be like a watered garden whose waters never fail.

The other is the integration between the darkness and the light of God, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, the Lawgiver and the Lawbreaker. I've said that Jesus was clear he came not to destroy the Law but to fulfil it. A cursory reading of the our text from Hebrews might seem to contradict that, until we look more closely at what it is saying and think it through. It is a magnificent and awe-inspiring passage. *Read bits....*

On the surface, it might look as though the Law is obsolete! 'That was then. Primitive religion! Fear, darkness, fire, gloom! Now we've got a better deal!' But actually, when we think into it, we know we can't be quite as sweeping in our rejection of what we might call Old Testament religion. Because we know that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Father, is the God of the Old Testament who gave the Law. And the invitation to us is to work at integrating in ourselves and in our faith the Old and the New. You know the theology of the book of Hebrews works hard at describing the relationship between the two as that between shadows and the real thing. I did quite a bit of photography as a young woman and in those days (!) you worked in a darkroom with negatives using chemical to transform them into positive. Under the positive lay the negative. They were integral to each other – in fact you couldn't have the positive without the negative first!

The Christian faith invites us to integrate things that might seem polar opposites. To hold together apparent ambiguity. To live with paradox and contradiction. And similarly, with this text, let's not be too hasty to say that 'primal fear' is a bad thing! I remember my first introduction to the mountain of Blencathra. I had arrived late at night and went to bed. I woke in the night, it was moonlit and I got out of bed, looked out of the window – and there above me, close but also far, was the power of the mountain. I was terrified, awe-struck, by its sleeping majesty. Sometimes we need to experience primal fear, when we are reminded that we are quite small in the universe. It is a reminder that not

all that is dark, or difficult, or apparently threatening is bad. Some of it is good. That goes for our lives too. Not easy, but good.

Can we, perhaps, this week, give permission to the Holy Spirit to break us out of the neat, highly controlled and monitored little rooms in which we live - into a wider vision and a greater purpose? Lord, start with me. Amen.