

## **The individual or the system?**

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon on Trinity 10 (25 August 2019) at St Peter's Wolvercote  
*Refs: Isaiah 58.9b-end; Hebrews 12.18-29; Luke 13.10-17*

*'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox and his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham who Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'* Luke 13, 16-17

We struggle with many things in the Bible – its complexities, its apparent contradictions and sometimes the ways in which it seems to fly in the face of our human sense for justice. But the Pharisees and the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day present no such problems. We all feel comfortable and assured in our condemnation of them, and we take delight in Jesus' cleverness in getting the better of them on many occasions. The values are clear cut, right and wrong are almost as obvious as they are in a fairy tale or children's story.

And so it is in today's Gospel, a story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath – in this instance, healing a woman who for eighteen years had been unable to straighten her bent body. It isn't clear why, but the causes may have been psychological: perhaps someone had abused her, verbally or physically, when she was smaller, until her emotions communicated themselves to her body. The President of the Synagogue took no pleasure in the miracle of healing and displayed no wonder at the meaning of Jesus' healing powers. This is hardly surprising – they must inevitably have seemed to threaten and potentially undermine his position of spiritual leadership. How often in life does someone resent a younger person who brings new energy and ideas, and in doing so seem to pose a threat to the authority and standing of the older person in his or her profession? So the President lets his anger take refuge in an official public rebuke. In this case, and others like it in the Gospels, the Jewish religious leaders have an answer: Jesus appears to be breaking the laws of the faith. It's perhaps significant that the President of the Synagogue does not address Jesus directly. He is fighting to maintain his standing in the eyes of the people, and it is to them that he appeals, reminding them of the law. In doing so he is trying to maintain his authority, appealing to the values with which they have grown up and which the religious leaders strive to maintain.

With typical brilliance Jesus answered his opponents with reference to their own law, which he knew as well as they did. The Rabbis abhorred cruelty to dumb animals and, even on the Sabbath, it was perfectly legal to loose beasts from their stalls and to water them. So surely it was right in the sight of God to loose this poor woman from her infirmity? Jesus' action makes it clear that it is not God's will that any human being should suffer one moment longer than is necessary. The Jewish law was that it was perfectly legal to help someone on the Sabbath whose life was in danger. Why should the same not apply to suffering?

Jesus could have said 'come back tomorrow and I will heal you', but would it have happened? Tomorrow might never come. Why allow suffering to continue until tomorrow if it can be helped today? Do we not ourselves so often put off good intentions, perhaps because we are stressed or busy, and then find that it is too late and the opportunity has gone? In the operation of our welfare state, how often does financial assistance, social support or medical help have to wait until the needs of an ever more complex system are satisfied? There is an element in Jesus' actions of that 'cutting through the red tape' which we all long for, which politicians always promise as elections approach, but which somehow never seems to materialise.

The President of the Synagogue, and those like him, were people who seemed to love systems more than they loved people. They were more concerned that their own petty laws should be observed than that a

woman should be helped and healed. The threat to religious authority was uppermost in their minds, yet what they had seen in Jesus' act of healing was a miracle which raised far more fundamental issues of mutual human responsibility – of how everyone should behave towards others. As Isaiah promises in our Old Testament reading, *'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'* (58, v.10). Was this not just what Jesus was doing?

At a more philosophical level, this passage raises one of the great problems of any country or society: the relationship between the individual and the system. There is always a potential tension between individual liberties and state authority, even when it is exercised for the common good. In times of war the individual vanishes: a man ceases to be a man and becomes a member of a particular age group, regiment or whatever: the needs of the state become supreme. In Communist and Fascist states that supremacy reigned supreme even in times of peace – all individual freedoms are sublimated to the supposed greater good of the state and its policies. At times this brings devastating results, as in Nazi Germany and the terrors of Stalin, or the well-meaning but disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' of Mao Tse-Tung's China, which led to at least 18 million deaths and, according to some sources, over 50 million.

As Christians we believe that God values every individual person. Christianity guarantees and defends the infinite value of the ordinary, individual man and woman. In this sense, the Christian faith is the bedrock of Western liberal democracy. Without Christian principles we move closer – potentially at least – to the totalitarian state where the individual is subordinated to the system, and indeed exists only to fulfil his or her role in that system. Some such states manage to inculcate a remarkable degree of acceptance of such systems: China is the prime example today, where many if not most people appear to be schooled to accept the primacy of the party and the state, and the suppression of individual opinions which in the West we regard as essential to democracy. The protests we have been watching in Hong Kong, which has a colonial past yet one that has sown the seeds of Western liberalism, bring to the fore the contrasts between the two systems.

This is not to say, of course, that Christians are politically libertarian. The Gospel is a gospel of social action, and that can often be achieved only by individuals acting collectively for the greater good. 'Society' is a critical concept for Christians in this sense: as humanity has moved from small hunting bands, through kinship-based social organisations to territorially-based, industrialised states, so the dependence of large numbers of people on others for many necessary products and services has constantly increased. As we become ever more specialised in what we do, so our dependence increases – not only within our nation but across our borders, as scenarios of a no-deal Brexit are now constantly reminding us. Such dependence demands organisation and efficient systems if its demands are to be met.

It is one of the greatest challenges of modern, complex societies that, as we become technologically more sophisticated and organisationally more interdependent, our political and economic systems need to combine social action for the common good with removal of collective injustices and respect for the rights and needs of individuals. Today's Gospel points to this problem, because what Jesus did for the poor, disabled woman he is longing to do for Israel by releasing it from its insistence on tight boundaries and the rigid application of laws. There is much more in the Gospels that can help us to navigate our way through the tensions between the individual and the system if we take time to explore them.

Amen