



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Tenth Sunday after Trinity Proper 16 Year C

Hebrews 12.18-29

Luke 13.10-17

I love the Downton Abbey series and still watch it on DVD. I was pretty fed up when the finale was reached. 'What, no more 'Downton!' Luckily there have been two films since and, maybe more on the way. In the latest the dowager Countess of Grantham, played superbly by Maggie Smith, dies. She has been the golden thread throughout the series. I want to pick out one scene which illustrates what I want to say later. Early on in the series, though an elderly lady, the dowager is very upright. On hearing of the death in childbirth of her youngest granddaughter Sybil she goes up to the big house to be with the family. She is greeted at the door by Carson, the butler. As we see her face it is grief stricken, next we see her walking towards the drawing room. The camera is behind her. Her whole figure, posture, everything is bent, weighed down by grief. As she passes the wall she leans on to it for support. Yes it is fine acting but it illustrates a point; our physical bodies can be affected by spiritual trauma, by our experiences. Not for nothing is disease sometimes known as dis – ease. If we think of our gospel reading we have the account of a woman wrenched out of the upright, bowed down.

<sup>10</sup> 'Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. <sup>11</sup>And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.'

We will never know what had happened to this woman that she was so cruelly crippled for so many years. Her life must have been devastated by it. Here in the gospel the root cause is referred to as 'a spirit.' We know that so much of disease then was accounted for by people as caused by sin, or demon possession. Maybe some was but so much more was due to natural ailments. We know however that a sense of sin or guilt or even terrible grief can weigh a person down, even destroy them. But that is not at all the same as the belief illness is imposed because a person has sinned. Jesus is at pains to show that that is simply not the case, previously in Luke Jesus deals with the sin theory:

13.1 'At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?'

There is no doubt both from biblical and contemporary historical sources that Pilate was a beast and a bully. He seemed to have taken great delight in trampling on the Jew's sensibilities, especially their religious beliefs. The particular incident referred to here is when a group of pilgrims had come to the Temple to worship and offer sacrifices as indeed hundreds of thousands did. For some reason Pilate sent his troops in and slaughtered them! The Jews Jesus is addressing are asking the age old question, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' They are trying to make sense of a horror. We all do this when faced by personal, national or international catastrophe. Often their answer was to pin it on sin; they must have sinned mustn't they? That's their punishment isn't it? Jesus' answer is a resounding no! This is summed up again in John 9

<sup>1</sup> 'As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned;'

Sometimes when he healed, Jesus forgave a person their sins. If someone fully believed that sin was the root cause of their illness then this ingrained belief, the belief that is metaphorically crippling them and ruining their lives, has to be dispelled. He does not say this to the woman.

<sup>12</sup> 'When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.'

<sup>13</sup> 'When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.'

Jesus says, 'You are set free,' people are prisoners of lots of things; illness is one of them. Jesus has taken away the burden that has bowed her down in pain for eighteen years. She is free, she stands upright. The words of Jesus are life changing and her response is to 'praise God.' This is an account of one of the healings of Jesus. Think of it if used as a metaphor.

The Jewish people though loved by God, though his covenant people have, time and time again turned from his way. Time and time they have sinned. Now the country is occupied by an oppressive force once more, Herod is not of the true line and is corrupt. Their religious leaders are corrupt but they are stubbornly clinging to the old way. This nation, the people of God, has been wrenched out of true by sin and wilfulness. They have chosen this sickness which is destroying them. They, unlike the woman, have turned to this road of destruction. They, unlike her, are not innocent victims.

Yet here Jesus stands before them, the Messiah foretold by the prophets, the one whom they have longed for throughout history and still they are blind. He offers words which will save, he brings healing. He will free them; he will turn lives around if they accept him. But they don't, so many will turn their backs. It is as ludicrous as if the woman had said, 'No thank you!' Yet the truth of their rejection of him is the stark reality. Jesus came to set them free, to set us all free, and to renew the broken relationship with God. His is the last covenant, made with his body broken and blood shed on the cross. This is the covenant which is established by love, the love which vanquished sin and death, the love which bore our sins for us and set us free. This is the 'man of sorrows' who will die for the nation and the world. The prophets had told them the truth, but they won't see Jesus for who he is. Why, because their own wilfulness and mindset put the letter of the law before humanitarian behaviour. Thus we have the leader of the synagogue:

<sup>14</sup> 'But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.'

We don't know where this is, Jesus was teaching in 'one' of the synagogues. Be it large or small it didn't matter, this leader would be a man of importance in the community. It's not just like secular power either; he has spiritual power over them. Most people who have power don't want to lose it. It takes a very special person to handle power responsibly. Jesus taught his disciples that they are not to 'Lord it over' others as is the norm. He is the co-creator of everything but he washed the disciple's feet and said 'I came not to be served but to serve.'

Jesus stands as the example to all in positions of power and authority particularly those in the church who need to lead by his example. Now, this leader of the synagogue is the antithesis of this. People are not important to him, their suffering is not important. The fact that he has just witnessed a life changing miracle is not important except in that it infringes the law. The truth is Jesus is a threat to his power and people do not like to have their power threatened. He doesn't even have the courage to address Jesus but turns on the crowd.

<sup>14</sup>But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.'

To him the law is all in all. It doesn't matter that this woman has been cured; set free from pain so she can live a normal and fulfilled life. People don't matter, rules do. 'Come on Tuesday to be healed!' He thinks if he keeps the law that's it, he has it right with God. After all God wants utter obedience to the law and me! Jesus puts him in his place.

<sup>15</sup> 'But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?' <sup>16</sup>And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'

Jesus is not standing alone with this man; in the crowd are opponents, men of this leader's ilk, hence the plural 'You hypocrites!' Jesus does not mince matters; that is exactly what they are. Jesus knows the law and he turns it on them. Of course you look after your livestock on the Sabbath and do what is necessary for their wellbeing. You untie them and lead them to life giving water. And here is this woman, Abraham's daughter and you are complaining and angry because this human being, bound in pain for eighteen years, is freed just because it's the Sabbath. Hypocrites indeed!

Further to that, of course, is that the law was given as a guide to the Jewish nation by God. However, now the Messiah has come, he has fulfilled the law, his way is the new way of God that people must follow. If they do then the Promised Land is God's renewed creation ruled by Jesus. People are no longer bound by the law. Certainly it should not be used to control people, to be a burden. It should never be put before human needs. God is a God of love who cares about each one of us.

<sup>17</sup>When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

For once Jesus' opponents have the grace to feel shame. Sadly it won't be long before that shame turns to resentment and anger. This man who tells the truth must be destroyed; we can't have him going around showing us up. The storm clouds are gathering. It is such a sad thing that those who tell the truth, stand up for what is right, indeed stand up for the ways of Christ are so often put down, even destroyed by those who oppose them because in their heart they know they are in the wrong but can't countenance opposition. We see it in the early church, we see it throughout history. Jesus will tell his own followers this. But he has words of comfort, 'Do not be afraid little flock.' Why? because God sent his Holy Spirit to be with us, to strengthen us and sustain us. From those

first fallible and frightened disciples, through to today and onwards the Holy Spirit is there. We trust in God and walk in his way. Jesus did this before us, he gave us the example. He spoke out for the truth of God; he offered freedom as our saviour as surely as he did to this woman. She not only believed and trusted, she 'worshipped God.' Jesus called her that day as he calls us. His way can be difficult, it is the way of integrity and truth but it is his example we follow and he holds us when we stumble. He is the God of forgiveness as well as love.

Our reading from Hebrews is from chapter twelve; we remember that the writer has spoken of the 'great cloud of witnesses' that had gone before. He begins with the founding father of the nation, Abraham, whose descendants will be 'more numerous than the stars in the heavens' and goes through those people of faith who have obeyed God. These were faithful to the Lord sometimes at great cost facing great suffering even death. Yet they remained steadfast in their obedience to God and their love of him. But they did not live to see the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The ultimate rewards won by Jesus for humanity on Calvary were not theirs. Yet they looked forward to the time when God would claim the earth. These people of faith should be an inspiration to the Hebrews and they should thank God that they have been taught of Jesus Christ, have turned to him and have, through the grace of God, been given the gifts Jesus won for them.

In the passage for today the writer of Hebrews goes back to Mount Sinai. It is worth looking at the passage he is referring to. The Israelites have crossed to safety and the pursuing Egyptians have been destroyed. Their journey is just beginning.

<sup>3</sup> 'Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: <sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup>Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.' (Exodus 19)

I love that passage, this is God's promise to the people who are to be 'priestly kingdom and a holy nation' if that is not an example of every member ministry I don't know what is. God sees all the people as his 'holy nation', they are all priestly. This is not about the chosen few. Here is the covenant of love. The whole world is his, but the special relationship is with this small chosen nation.

I have a wedding this week. The bride and groom make a covenant of love with each other, they make two way promises of love and trust. God does the same, he makes his promise, but the people have a responsibility too, they must love him and follow in his way. There is an 'if' here, 'if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession.' They must obey him, follow his commandments,

<sup>7</sup> 'So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. <sup>8</sup>The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.' (Exodus 19)

No one except Moses and then Aaron were allowed to go to the Mountain, it was too holy,



<sup>12</sup> 'You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.

Mount Sinai must have been a terrifying place to the people at its foot. It is described in Hebrews, <sup>18</sup> 'You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,' (Hebrews 12)

And in Exodus 19,

<sup>16</sup> 'On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.

<sup>17</sup> Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. <sup>19</sup> As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.'

This then is when the Lord spoke with Moses and gave the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the law, the law which the Jewish nation has been guided by ever since. This reading is overarching from Mount Sinai, the holy mountain and onwards. The people wandered in the wilderness until finally they, under God's guidance, entered the Promised Land. Zion was the centre of Jerusalem. Here the great Temple was built by Solomon to house the tablets given by God. The people believed that God's very presence was within the Temple. It was destroyed and rebuilt after the exile. It was beautified and enlarged. But it had been despoiled; the Ark of the Covenant was no longer within the Temple. This was Mount Zion but this is not what the writer of Hebrews is referring to. He is referring to 'the heavenly Jerusalem'.

<sup>22</sup> 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.'

It is by Jesus Christ that the new way has come about. When Abel was murdered by his brother Cain, his spilled blood cried out for vengeance. Not so with Jesus, his blood spilled for us on the cross brings redemption and the forgiveness of sins for all who repent and truly turn to him in love. As well as this in Jesus the newly created order has been born, this is the New Jerusalem. This perfected order will restore both the heavens and the earth. Sin and death and evil will be no more and the ways of the kingdom will be re-established. This will be the order that God intended, the heavens and earth as God intended them to be. Here the writer suggests that this is not just some future state but that it is beginning in Christ and that we are living it now or should be. The question is, are our lives attuned to it? Are we people of the old world or the new world of Jesus?

The Jews clung on to the law although it had been superseded by the way of God in Jesus. There was nothing wrong with the law, but Christ was its fulfilment. Now people should not cling to the old Temple worship but turn to him as Messiah and God. The trouble was they couldn't see the truth, and our gospel story illustrates that in the synagogue leader just as surely as the woman represents those who are freed when they turn to Christ. It is the healing hands of Jesus stretched out for us on the cross that set us free, 'He met us in his Son and brought us home.'

There is a warning to the Hebrews, linked to God's warning to the people not to touch the mountain, not to disobey, not to let their own wilfulness obscure the word of God.

<sup>25</sup> 'See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!'

Remember he is talking to a persecuted people; they are living around AD 62. Worship in the Temple is still flourishing. The Romans won't destroy it until AD 70. There is pressure on these new Christians to backslide to re-join Judaism from every quarter. Their own ruler Herod had James the Great executed in AD 44 and James the brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem was killed in AD 62. It was not just the Romans who were persecuting the Christians. But the writer's command is clear: you must stand firm and keep strong in the faith if you are to inherit what Jesus won for all who turn to him. You can be part of the newly created kingdom of God but only if you stand firm in your faith. Life will not be easy for these Hebrews any more than it was for those ancestors he spoke of, but they followed the truth putting God before everything even in the face of suffering.

Jesus walked the way of suffering, in obedience to God before these people, he is their example, he is ours.

<sup>26</sup> 'At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' <sup>27</sup>This phrase 'Yet once more' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup>Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; <sup>29</sup>for indeed our God is a consuming fire.'

The writer goes back to exodus once more, then his voice shook the earth but the time is coming when he will speak and both the heavens and the earth will not only be shaken but changed forever. This is 'the promised day of God.' This is when his newly created order will come into being and all evil will be destroyed, when earth and heaven will be restored to what he originally intended. Jesus will come then once more to rule. We can be citizens of the city of God, in fact as the writer of Hebrews says, you are citizens of God's new kingdom, it began with Jesus Christ, but you must try to live as citizens of the new order don't cling to the old ways, follow the way of Jesus, the Christian way. This might sound all very theological and far removed from us today but it is anything but. Each day we have decisions to make about what we should do and how we should behave. The challenge to each one of us is, are we living in the way Jesus would want or are we doing our own thing to get our own way? Are we Christ centred or self-centred? Are we members of Christ's city here on earth? Do we follow his command to 'love one another as I have loved you,' or do we put ourselves and our desires first? Christianity was and always will be a challenge not only to the established order but to its members.

*'The day in whose clear-shining light all wrong shall stand revealed. When justice shall be throned in might and every hurt be healed.'* Frederick Lucian Hosmer.

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