

Good News from Doctor Luke 13

Healing on God's Day Off

Luke 13:10-21

Luke wants us to be drawn into this scenario so let's for a change, imagine that you are on the edge of the crowd that has followed Jesus so far. You haven't heard everything and haven't understood all you have heard, but you think you've got the general drift of it all and find it both compelling and alarming. In you go with Jesus to the Synagogue on this Sabbath. What do you see, and what sense does it make to you?

You see - everybody sees - this poor woman. She was probably a well-known local character. In a village where everyone's life was public, people would know who she was and how long she'd been like this. Luke says she had 'a spirit of weakness', which probably means simply that nobody could explain medically why she had become bent double. Some today think that her disability had psychological causes; some people probably thought so then as well, though they might have said it differently. Maybe somebody had persistently abused her, verbally or physically, when she was smaller, until her twisted-up emotions communicated themselves to her body, and she found she couldn't get straight. And even after all the medical advances of the last few hundred years, we are very much aware that such things happen without any other apparent cause.

In the Synagogue, though, you can see an unspoken power struggle going on. There is a Synagogue President in charge of the meeting, but all eyes are on Jesus - which puts both of them in an awkward spot in terms of protocol. Jesus however doesn't wait. A word, a touch, and the woman is healed. The Synagogue President, thoroughly upstaged, let's his anger take refuge in an official public rebuke, rather as if a policeman tried to arrest someone because their football team had just beaten his.

You, as the observer, understand all this. It's bound to be difficult for the local village hierarchy when someone like

Jesus comes into town, and when he does extraordinary things in the synagogue it will inevitably cause a fuss. But listen to Jesus' answer. Think about what you've heard on the journey up to this point; the devastating analysis of what was wrong with Israel as a whole, the warnings of what lay ahead. Now hear what Jesus has to say and ponder what it might mean.

'Double Standards!' Jesus declares. 'You do one thing yourself and yet want to stop me doing something which is no different, and even more appropriate. This is just play-acting. You are quite happy (he must have known well enough what passed as legitimate Sabbath practice and what didn't) to untie an animal that needs water; how much more should I untie this woman - Abraham's daughter, bound by Satan? And what better day than the Sabbath?'

You get the point about untying the animal and untying the woman. But what is he saying about her? First, she's a daughter of Abraham; second, she has been tied up for 18 years by - the Satan, the one who has Israel as a whole in his grip, the one against whom Jesus has won an initial victory! Suddenly new light dawns. Luke wants his readers to understand that what Jesus is doing for this poor woman is what he is longing to do for Israel as a whole. The enemy, the accuser, has had Israel in his power for many years, and Jesus' Kingdom-message is the one thing that can free her. But Israel's insistence on tight boundaries, including the rigid application of Sabbath Law, is preventing it happening. Unless, the kingdom-message heals her, there is no hope.

And here's the point the Holy Spirit wants us to grasp: if that's the perception 2000 years ago how much more for us is it a sad perception by the majority of outsiders, of the contemporary Church. 'Healing on God's day off' is a reasonable summary (beautifully parodied in Nicholas Allan's book: Jesus' day off) and the religious elite shout foul: they focus on the insignificant and sadly ignore the magnificent (a woman gloriously healed after 18 years of suffering in body, mind and spirit). Rules and Law before Grace and Mercy: well let me tell you that I too have had enough of such nonsense. Luke is not

alone in re-setting the course for the new Infant Church: the Bible is littered with descriptions of how we are called to focus on those outside the community of Faith. As William Temple put it post-war: the Church is the only organisation that exists solely for the benefit of its non-members. So listen to this litany of how we need to make a difference to our neighbours within but most importantly beyond our Churches, this litany of what truly makes us a Grace Community called the Body of Christ.

This is Christianity as the Lord intended:

Genesis 12:2-3 God wants the lives of His People to bless others.

Isaiah 58:10 God followers should spend themselves on behalf of the poor.

Micah 6:8 We should be known for living humbly and pursuing justice and offering mercy.

Matthew 5:44 We should love people who seem to be 'enemies' and pray for them.

Matthew 25:34-40 Whatever people do for the 'least of these' forgotten and overlooked people in society - they do for Jesus.

Mark 9:35 The greatest role in life is to serve others.

Luke 4:18 Jesus' ministry was first introduced as freeing captives, serving the oppressed and healing the sick.

Luke 15:3-7 God pursues people like a shepherd would search for even one straying sheep.

Luke 15:11-32 God is described as a father who patiently waits for the return of his child

John 3:17 Jesus came not to condemn the world but to be its saviour.

John 15:13 You cannot love a person more than by giving you life up for him or her.

Galatians 5:13 Christians have freedom to love unconditionally, as Christ loved people.

Philippians 2:17, 2 Timothy 4:6, 1 John 3:16-19 Our lives are to be 'poured out' and spent to serve God's purposes.

Philippians 2:5-11 Colossians 1:21-22 Our attitude should be like that of Jesus, who loved and accepted humans even though they were enemies of God. Then he changes their status from enemies to friends, even sons and daughters of God, when they commit themselves to Him.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 One of the qualifications of Christian leadership is to have 'a good reputation with outsiders'

Titus 3:2 Christians should be peaceable and considerate, showing true humility towards everyone.

2 Peter 3:9 God wants everyone to repent and turn to him.

Would other people describe your life as a Christian in these terms? Do these principles guide your relationships with those beyond the Christian church? Are you a Christ follower who seeks to live out this picture of Christianity as you interact with others?

It all comes down to this: we must become Christ-like again.

This is the Healing on God's day off we need as individuals and as church more than anything. It seems like an oversimplified solution, but when you recognise that being a Christian demands more than simply saying a prayer, assenting to a statement of belief, and going to heaven when you die, it becomes more personally challenging. Add the concept that being Christian means being God's agent of grace in the world, and the task becomes even more sobering. We must commit to doing the hard work of recapturing Christianity's essence in our own lives. It's easy to point out the imperfections of others, but it takes much more humility and grace to confront the faults in ourselves. Being Christian is hard work. Putting the needs of others above your own, loving your neighbour, doing good to those who would do evil to you, exercising humility, suffering with those less fortunate. And doing it all with a pure heart is nearly impossible. But it is Jesus' model and call. And that is what it will take to break the Synagogue/Church mentality and get back to following Him. When an aspiring saint asked Mother Teresa, "How can I be like you?" her simple response was, 'Find your own Calcutta.' She understood the core of the Christian Life - the truest

knowing comes in doing. The Contemporary Church needs such a Jesus revolution.

Now maybe, like our observer, you think, Jesus is still hoping that there is time; that Israel bent double and unable to stand upright, will be untied from her bondage in a great Sabbath celebration, a great act of liberation (lets pray so even now), and that His Church today has begun this glorious new Reformation which will lead us to becoming once again the Bride of Christ purely reflecting our Saviour? And maybe you think, that Jesus intends that by going to Jerusalem this will all come to pass or even now He requires of us to revisit the Cross with Him and Luke to realise once again what really matters, and leave behind baggage personal and religious. And then there are the little sayings, which Luke at least regards as explanations of what has just happened. The Kingdom is like a tiny seed producing a huge tree - which can then accommodate all the birds in the sky. One action in one synagogue on one Sabbath, One Christian in 2014 in secular Britain saying enough and turning again to Christ; what can this achieve? But when Jesus sows the seed of the Kingdom, nobody knows what will result. Or the Kingdom as a small helping of leaven, hidden apparently in the flour. It seems insignificant and ineffectual; but before long the whole mixture is leavened. One healing of one woman, one minor new movement, one heart strangely warmed- but every time you break with the authority of Christ the satanic chains that have tied people up, another victory is won which will go on having repercussions. Ponder what you have seen and heard. Would you go up to Jerusalem following this man? It might be risky. It might be unpredictable. But where else would you go and whom else would you follow? Follow Him to the Cross encourages Luke. Lets follow Him now as we go into Communion. Lets identify with our Jesus not only in His glorious resurrection but supremely through the cross.

Pastor David

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