

## Sermon - shame & release

Based on: Jeremiah 1.4–10; Hebrews 12.18–29; Luke 13.10–17

### Prophets are called to costly speech

- The Old Testament reading from the start of the prophecy of Jeremiah describes his awakening to the divine reality of his calling.
- It acknowledges that the Lord God knows him intimately, and - in that knowledge - now compels him to speak to the divine perspective in his own context.
- There is a reassurance that he will be speaking God's word, and a warning that doing so will immediately make those bent on following their own desire rather than God's desire want to oppose him.
- This is followed by a general mandate that, in speaking God's word, he will find himself involved in the uncomfortable business of plucking up, pulling down, destroying, and overthrowing.
- And, in addition, find himself in the happier but equally demanding business of building and planting (*cf Jeremiah 1.9-10*).
- While this description is found at the start of Jeremiah's prophecy, it is generally true for many prophets, in both Old and New Testament times, and also in the succeeding centuries, and also today when God calls on individuals to continue to speak the divine word into their specific situations.
- The description could have been for Jesus himself, as we will see when we explore today's Gospel reading.

### The GAFCON schism

- Before we do that, it is appropriate to acknowledge one of the aspects of today's context for this story.
- Last week there was the unhappy news that some leaders in the Anglican church of Australia have decided to set up a new church, that they are presumptuously calling the Diocese of the Southern Cross, as if it were an Anglican diocese.
- It is not. It is not a diocese within the Anglican Church of Australia, and it is fundamentally not Anglican.
- Sadly, the former Archbishop of Sydney and the current Bishop of Tasmania have helped to establish it, and are inviting priests and parishes from other dioceses to join it.
- In their capacity as Anglican bishops they are effectively encouraging Anglicans to leave the Anglican church to join an ultra-conservative new denomination, that will not permit divorcees to be ordained leaders, will not permit women to be ordained leaders, and will not permit same-sex attracted people to be ordained leaders.
- These are all controversies within the Anglican church, two of which have already been resolved after much debate and prayer.
- The third controversy is still under debate, but this is not valid grounds for schism.
- The richness of the Anglican Communion is found in our wonderful diversity, across the spectra of liberal and conservative, Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic, traditional and contemporary, and a whole variety in between.
- To insist that one wing of the church should represent the whole body goes directly against St Paul's teaching, as found in 1 Corinthians 12.
- Paul writes:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Corinthians 12.12)*

*If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (1 Corinthians 12.17)*

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*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'* (1 Corinthians 12.21)

*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.* (1 Corinthians 12.14)

- And yet the international Anglican organisation that goes by the acronym GAFCON (Global Anglican Future Conference) has already perpetrated the same schismatic action in the USA, Canada, and more recently in New Zealand.

### Our response: to make welcome

- Now it may be that some Anglicans are fairly bemused by this news of a schism, and regard this in the same way as a fight between or within political parties - that is, something that leaders get themselves caught up in, but not really impacting on our own day to day reality.
- I sincerely hope that it won't affect us as a parish - however, we need to be sensitive to those who are, or who might be, impacted.
- For those who are made unwelcome where they should reasonably expect God's welcome, I hope that they can experience that welcome here.
- Again, in 1 Corinthians 12 St Paul writes:  
*But God has so arranged the body ... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all together rejoice with it.* (1 Corinthians 12.24-26)
- So where any member of our church community suffers, let us acknowledge and support them in their suffering; and where anyone is honoured, let us also celebrate with them.

### Release from bondage

- I perceive that this schism is an aspect of the current context into which the second part of today's gospel story speaks.
- A woman comes into the synagogue, presumably to participate in worship, and Jesus sees that she has been crippled because of what we might describe as a psychosomatic injury.
- It is quite possible that the weight of some injustice enacted by her or against her - it doesn't matter which - has bent her over.
- Luke intentionally describes this as 'for eighteen years', allowing the early hearers of this story to make an association with the eighteen years of bondage to the Moabites that the Israelites were under during a break in Israelite leadership at the time of the judges of Israel (*cf. Judges 3.14*).
- Likewise, there was a further eighteen years of bondage to the Philistines and Ammonites during another break in the Israelite leadership in the same era (*cf. Judges 10.8*).
- Jesus calls the crippled woman to him, and, laying hands on her, announces that God has released her from what was binding her.
- Her response is to believe that she has been released from her burden, stand up straight and praise God.
- What a wonderful manifestation of God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

### Holding leaders to account

- Now we come to the behaviour that Jesus addresses then, and calls on his followers to continue to address today.
- The leader of the synagogue avoids criticising Jesus directly, but perpetrates the same kind of victim-blaming that we often see these days.

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- The leader tells the crowd, with an implication that the crippled - now healed - woman is at fault, that they should come to the synagogue to be cured only on the working days of the week.
- His concern is that God's rules for keeping the sabbath are being broken by this woman expecting Jesus to undertake the work of healing on the sabbath.
- Jesus calls out the religious leaders for their hypocritical attitude.
- After Jesus had announced God's release of the bondage of injustice for the woman who had *not* sought out Jesus at all, but had responded to *Jesus calling her to him* - the leaders then try to impose a new injustice upon her, by implying that she was at fault for making Jesus undertake the work of healing on the sabbath.
- As a fellow religious leader, Jesus is having none of this, and calls them to account by saying, in effect: 'You release your own animals from being bound, on the sabbath, so that they can drink water, and yet you would deny a fellow Jew - a daughter of Abraham - release from being bound because it's the sabbath?'
- These religious leaders would provide life-sustaining water to their own animals on the sabbath, but deny someone the divine water of life also on the sabbath.
- Jesus is not opposed to the law of observing the sabbath, but he has a life-giving interpretation as to *how* the sabbath should be kept, rather than the obstructive interpretation of the synagogue leadership.
- As one commentator has written: '*instead of seeing a broken rule, we must see the broken person as of first importance.*'<sup>1</sup>

### Jesus and shame

- Luke continues the story by saying that Jesus put these fellow religious leaders to shame.
- Jesus dared to hold them to account for how they conducted their office of leadership in front of others, and they lost face.
- And yet so often Christians resist following the example of Jesus in this regard.
- In many secular cultures there is an avoidance of the loss of face, of being shamed.
- It can even be regarded as bad to hold people to account if it might shame them.
- And yet Jesus calls us to enact, not the secular culture of our society, but the culture of the Kingdom of God.
- A culture that is not afraid of shame, or of losing face - just as Jesus wasn't afraid of the shame of being publicly convicted as worth flogging, and the shame of being killed as a traitor of the state.
- When people are fearful of shame it is because they would rather hang on to their pride for fear of admitting wrong, rather than practicing humility and seeking reconciliation.

### Jesus also calls us to himself

- I am going to conclude by returning to the first part of the Gospel story, where the woman is not too proud to attend synagogue, and to come to worship with others, in spite of her condition.
- We are invited in humility to acknowledge aspects of ourselves that might be like that woman - those aspects of our own lives where we might feel burdened, bent over, or bound.
- Just as Jesus called the woman to him, may we hear Jesus calling each of us in our need, to come to him for restoration to wholeness.
- May we, like that woman, believe in God's desire for us to be made whole, and to allow whatever is burdening or binding us to be released, so that we can stand upright before God, and offer him our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara E Reid, *The Lectionary Commentary: v.3. The Gospels*, p396 (2001, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co.)

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- And just as Jesus sends us to continue his ministry, may we likewise invite others to hear and respond to that same call from Jesus, so that they too can be released, and experience the same restoration to wholeness and well-being of life in all its fullness.
- And, as a final reminder to keep making the same response as the woman did, I repeat the end of today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews:

*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. (Hebrews 12.28)*