

Lord God, when we are faced with decisions that seem uncomfortable, by the power of your Holy Spirit, help us weigh up where the greater love will result. In the name of Jesus. Amen

- I remember, years ago, a friend telling me about a week's holiday he had recently had in a remote Scottish village. There were some public toilets in the village which were left open throughout the week, 24 hours a day. However when he went to use the on the Sunday, he found them chained shut with a large padlock. Clearly there were six days on which to relieve yourself, but going to the lavatory on the Lord's Day took one's mind off the more important business of worshipping God.
  - The church elders obviously felt really strongly that allowing the toilets to be open was just a step too far towards the watering down of Lord's Day observance!
- All of which is rather silly, but for them it clearly crossed a line between the acceptable and the unacceptable.
- And it is true that for all of us, rightly or wrongly, we will have similar prejudices and lines in the sand which when crossed we feel are a symptom of the breakup of society as we know it.
  - "If you open the toilet today, it'll be the betting shop tomorrow", the church elders might have prophesied. Which, as we know, is what has come to pass.
- I don't mind a few immigrants coming in to our country but we just can't manage hundreds of thousands.
- Of course I want new people to come to church, but it is important they know how to behave.
- Or a special one for teenagers: I don't talk to her. She's not in my group.
- When Jesus healed the crippled woman on the Sabbath day it could be argued that he crossed a line in the sand.
- The Jews were and sometimes still are fanatical about what they could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. As I was preparing for this sermon I googled Sabbath day observance and up popped dozens of websites debating the minutiae what was acceptable on the Sabbath and what wasn't. And in case you think I am having a go at the Jewish faith try googling about receiving communion in a denomination not your own.
- The leader of the synagogue felt Jesus had gone too far, but Jesus argued that he was interpreting the Jewish Law more correctly and with less hypocrisy than the synagogue leader. After all he was only doing what the prophet Isaiah was telling him to do.
- Did you notice in our first reading from Isaiah, *'If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord ... If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 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*
- *'If you ... satisfy the needs of the afflicted'. ... 'If you remove ... the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*
- 'Consider Jesus and the synagogue leader. Who was satisfying the needs of the afflicted? Who was pointing his finger in a condemnatory way?
- Isaiah was speaking to a nation of impoverished Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon and were doing their best to build a life for themselves back in Jerusalem again. Not surprisingly it was hard work. Not surprisingly they were having to put their own needs first a lot of the time. They thought they were honouring God by keeping the Sabbath faithfully, and still they were not prospering. Isaiah is saying that keeping the Sabbath is a matter of sacrificially loving as God loves, not of rigorous observance to a set of rules.
- And remember, before you think that this is a miracle story which means we don't have to come to church, where the action took place. Jesus had gone to worship. To pray. To meet with his Father.
- Jesus clearly showed his compassion for the crippled woman, loving as his Father God loves. The leader of the synagogue was doing his best to show his love for God but was not loving as God loves, who seems to make a bee line for people on the margins of society. The people we so often like to act as if they were invisible.
  - And Jesus clearly pointed out the hypocrisy in the synagogue leader's actions. He'd look after his donkey by 'working' on the Sabbath day, untying it from the manger and leading it away to give it water.

- But he wasn't prepared to look after a crippled human being
  - We all need to do our bit to save the planet. I'm just popping out in the car to Tesco. It saves a good half hour if I don't walk
  - It's really important the NHS is well funded but I do object to paying so much tax.
  - I'd love to give more money to the needy but you can't help everyone can you.
  - Or a special one for teenagers: I'd like to earn lots of money to buy my own iPad, but I don't see why I should get out of bed before 10 o'clock in the morning.
- Jesus' ministry was one of release not control. He used the Law to liberate rather than to control.
  - He released the woman from her bondage.
  - He released the world from the bondage of sin
  - He releases you and me from the sting of the unhealthy desires of the world. Be successful. Earn more money. Look beautiful. Take what you want.
- The synagogue leader is using the Law to control rather than to liberate.
  - Maybe he wanted order in his house of prayer and to preserve the status quo?
  - Maybe he was worried about what others might say about him?
  - Maybe he was just too cowardly to make a stand for something clearly so good and noble?
  - Maybe he was just sincerely mistaken?
- In any of these there is very little about setting free, about release in his actions. And quite a lot about control. And if you are being mean, you can easily see the hypocrisy of his watered donkey, which is in his interest to liberate, and the crippled woman who provides no benefit to the synagogue leader by her healing.
  - And of course, he does have a point.
  - It would be quite possible for Jesus to say to the woman, 'Come back tomorrow love, and I'll see if I can find a window to heal you then', as he made a note in his heavenly online diary.
  - But do you notice that Jesus never seems to put things off for the future. What he does, he does now. I can't think of a single occurrence where he says 'Come back tomorrow.' Even as he is saying to his mother, 'My time is not yet come', he is changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana.
- So there is something here about how we honour God. We do it best by loving our neighbour. Especially if she is on the margins.
- We do it best within a context of worship. After all Jesus had gone to the synagogue. The miracle wouldn't have happened if he'd been in the Capernaum branch of Lidl.
- And we do it best when we live in the present rather than putting things off some time in the future.
  - Jesus healed the woman on the Sabbath. He didn't wait until it was convenient or non-controversial.
- So who do you identify with in this morning's Gospel reading.
- Are you the crippled woman, perhaps now healed. Able to pinpoint when Jesus has brought you wholeness, healing and acceptance. I do hope you can see a few times in your life like this.
  - I was talking only last week to a member of the congregation who was witnessing about the extraordinary effect of prayer on his search for a more fulfilling job.
- Or are you Jesus, striving to live a coherent life and able to point to events where you have allowed divine love to influence your actions, even if it is inconvenient or makes you stand out from the crowd. I hope you can think a few examples when this is true because of course as Christians we are the body of Christ and have Christ within us through the power of his Holy Spirit..
- But I hope also that you can think of a few occasions when you can identify with the leader of the synagogue. Where there are lines in the sand that you fear might be crossed and it makes you feel uncomfortable as you try to balance up the good that might result with the risk that is taken. Because that means you know you are not perfect. You know you need God's grace to help you live in his Kingdom. And once you know you need help, you become less controlling and love begins to take over.
- Go on, unlock the doors to the toilets! Live dangerously. Amen.