

## **Sermon for 21<sup>st</sup> August 2022**

**Preached at St Michael Smarden**

**Isaiah 58:9b-end; Luke 13:10-17**

### **Sermon**

I seem to be preaching on a lot of passages recently where Jesus ends up calling someone a hypocrite. It's a word that the Greeks used to mean an actor – someone playing a role that isn't their authentic self. Figuratively, Jesus uses it to mean someone who doesn't practise what they preach, and that's the meaning that has come down to us in English.

In this story, we have the classic example of hypocrisy in action. Jesus heals an old woman who's bent double, but he does it on a Sabbath day which is work that would normally be forbidden according to the Law, the Torah. Inevitably, the leader of the synagogue is there to complain about this breach of the rules. Jesus responds by quoting a concession from a series of oral rabbinic teachings known as the 'Mishnah', in which the owner of cattle may take them to water, so long as the cattle bear no burdens while doing so. Jesus claims that healing someone on the Sabbath is in the same category. He's not a doctor selling his services, making money by breaking the Sabbath for his own benefit. He's embodying the kingdom of God, breaking into the earthly world of selfish endeavour with a glimmer of the true reality which is to come. He's not breaking the Sabbath, he *is* the Sabbath, which is why he declares himself 'Lord of the Sabbath' in Matthew, Mark and in Luke.

But perhaps it's too easy to condemn this synagogue leader for interpreting the rules strictly. Would we not have done the same in his situation? It is, after all, the duty of any leader of an organisation to err on the side of caution when deciding whether to allow exceptions to the rules. They are the ones who are held to account and publicly humiliated if laxity leads to public scandal. Indeed, this old lady is not in any immediate danger. She is not an ox that has fallen into

a pit and needs immediate rescue. She has lived with her condition for 18 years and is presumably now quite used to it. Nor does she even ask to be healed. Jesus simply calls her out of the congregation and heals her on the spot. One might argue that he is being deliberately provocative to do this on the Sabbath in front of everybody at the synagogue. He could have done this yesterday, or tomorrow, with no scandal whatsoever.

But it's also tempting, when you're the person in charge of the rules, or when you're zealous about keeping the rules, to forget what the rules are *for*. It's so easy for our focus to become entirely zoomed in on watching for infractions and forget entirely that our calling is to seek God, whom we fail to notice at work behind us, loving the very people we might be oppressing.

I remember when I'd just turned 20 I went out on a mission to Albania to re-establish a church community in that country which had been communist until the year before.. The local youth were fascinated with our rehearsals in their school gym, and they were constantly trying to sneak in the doors or even climb trees outside to get a glimpse of what we were doing. I was one of the team asked to protect our security and privacy and I remember desperately chasing children and teenagers around the building, trying to lock them out. Only later did it occur to me how completely we had re-enacted the disciples' attempt to prevent children from disrupting Jesus' ministry. I'd become so single-minded about the rules I was enforcing that I'd entirely lost track of any thought for the people we were there to love and serve. We could have welcomed the children in, but we chased them out.

Similarly, the great danger for the scribes, Pharisees and religious leaders enforcing the Sabbath rules, was that a religious observance designed to reinforce a happy memory and celebration of Hebrew liberation from Egyptian slavery, had become a means of social control and oppression.

It has become a tendency throughout history for religious and cultural rules that were once liberating, to become a means of social control by the elite. In the

American South, slaves complained that their owners were happy seeing them involved in degrading activities such as wrestling and drinking on Sundays, but banned them from study or education. The Sabbath rules became used to prevent the black slaves bettering themselves and demonstrating their humanity, thus preserving the social status quo.

The leader of the synagogue in this passage is quite right that Jesus could have waited another day without much more hardship to the woman, but it is dangerously easy to counsel someone else to be patient from a position of power where you are not personally affected by the rules you enforce.

How reasonable it seemed to deny women a leadership role in the church or the country, when you were not a woman. God has ordained it, says the entirely male magisterium of the Catholic Church, even today. How reasonable it seems to refuse gay people the right to marry in our churches, when you are yourself not gay and have never once been abused or mocked in the street for holding hands with a same-sex partner.

But have you noticed how people's obsession with rules tends to become more flexible when the weight of the rule presses heavily on someone close to them? This is when people begin to see injustice and even unintentional cruelty in a rule they might ordinarily support or at least acquiesce to.

In the TV show *Poldark*, which was required watching for those of us living in Cornwall, you may remember a character called Kitty who was a former black slave who had risen to marry a white colonel. Her friend, Demelza – Poldark's wife if you're keeping up – commented as they walked together, that people were not being as mean to Kitty as she had first reported. Kitty replied that "this is because they think I'm your maid", and Demelza is silenced as her privilege is exposed.

Jesus sees this clearly wherever he goes, and he shows no hesitation in calling out the hypocrisy of rules being used to sustain oppression, power and social

control, when they were originally intended to bring social harmony and to draw people towards God.

The answer, he insists, is not to *abandon* the rules. He refuses to abolish the Law. Instead, Jesus says he comes to fulfil the Law, which is to restore it to its original purpose of drawing attention to the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Love, of mutual compassion and forgiveness, mutual blessing, empathy and support.

The rules were never intended to keep the sick and outcast in their place, separate from good and holy high society. So, Jesus immediately declares this old woman free, and then touches her to confirm her healing and to visibly restore her to her rightful place in the community. There were echoes of this perhaps in the way that Princess Diana once touched and comforted the sufferers of AIDS when half the world was afraid they could catch it from gay people they still saw as immoral and disgusting.

Over and over in the gospels, Jesus refuses to let religious rules be used to oppress people. A group of men want to stone to death a woman caught in adultery. Jesus says you can only do this if you accept that you're just as guilty and should be stoned as well. He holds up a mirror to their hypocrisy and to their privilege, challenging their assumption that rules only apply to *other*, lesser, people.

If you have ever been attacked, denigrated or excluded by those who claim to be guardians of religious or cultural rules, you will know how important it is when someone else with privilege stands up to defend and include you.

If you have *never* experienced these things then perhaps you are the one with the privilege, and, if the call comes, I hope and pray you too will stand up with Jesus in solidarity and say, 'You hypocrites! You have entirely missed the point of the Kingdom of God!'