

Sermon. St Thomas 25th August 2019

This summer has been a very special one. Not only have I celebrated two very significant anniversaries, plus a daughter's wedding but I have been also extremely grateful to our wonderful NHS. 3 ops in 3 months - not bad! A tricky molar root extraction; a hip replacement and a new lens to replace a cataract. I'm hoping that my next MOT will be some years away!

The woman in today's gospel had to wait not 3 months but 18 years! The poor woman had scoliosis - curvature of the spine leaving her bent over and unable to stand upright. 10 years ago, my great-niece had the same condition; thank God she had a very successful operation and is able to lead a normal life.

But we all know that not everybody is able to receive corrective surgery or enjoy a miracle cure.

A lifelong friend of Angela has an auto-immune condition which has confined her to one room in her tiny flat for 6 years, unable to walk or stand.

Another friend of ours of 50 years died earlier this year having been struck down by motor neurone disease.

I mention these two because healing can come in the most wonderful and unexpected ways. Christine has just been able to buy the ground floor flat beneath her and is excited about having a small garden and planning how she will make it wheelchair friendly.

Although Richard was completely helpless for the last few months of his life the love that he gave others and that surrounded him and his family was wonderful.

So, healing as we all know is not only physical and the things that hold us back are not only physical. We are told that the woman in the gospel had been crippled by a spirit. There are many things that can cripple – we may not call them spirits but rather broken relationships, guilt, upbringing, anxiety about the future, poverty. We may have to live with some of these things just as my friends have. God knows how but somehow, they did not allow their conditions to destroy them but rather their situations were transformed and are being transformed.

Luke's Gospel is all about transformation; being set free, being released from the bonds that bind us.

That's what happened to the woman and what happened echoes how St Luke sees Jesus – as the one who brings and is the Good news of liberation, the one who sets us free from all that binds us and prevents us from becoming what God intends for us.

This is how Luke puts it in chapter 4. Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and quotes the prophet Isaiah

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind
To set at liberty those who are oppressed”.

Jesus then closed the book and said

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

What a challenge that is for us who live in such a privileged part of the world.

How easy it is to feel overwhelmed by the things that worry us - global warming, the growing gulf between rich and poor, the environment, refugees, homelessness, overcrowding in prisons.

And yet our vocation as Christians and members of the Church is to hold dear to that vision of liberation. That vision which Jesus proclaimed and lived out and which eventually led him to the cross. It was tough for him and if we are faithful it will certainly be tough for us.

Maybe some of these issues and how here in the Bourne we might engage with them will be on the agenda for the Parish Vision Day later on next month.

Some of the people who have inspired me most are those who have been alongside those most in need of freedom from their bonds. **St Francis'** life was changed when he embraced the leper. He saw in him a child of God who had up until then been totally rejected by society. **Jean Vanier** who has recently died spent much of his life setting up L'Arche communities for adults with learning disability. He changed the whole culture of how we treat people with disabilities. **Greta Thunberg**, the Swedish girl, has championed the growing concern about climate change which is now firmly on the national and international agenda. An old colleague of mine **Daphne Jones** who spent many years living in Cable St, Stepney befriending young women who had fallen into prostitution. We are not all called to be St Francis, Jean Vanier, Greta Thunberg or Daphne Jones. But we are called to be aware, encourage and even participate as individuals and church communities in those movements which are on the side of Jesus's call to bring freedom to the oppressed, release to the captives, good news to the poor and sight to the blind.

And here we are today, worshipping in church on the Sabbath Day - the same day that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. The Sabbath day when Jesus and his Jewish followers celebrated their liberation from slavery and the day that we Christians celebrate the new life, the new hope, the new freedom that the risen Christ brings to our very needy world.