

Dear friends,

This week we read of a healing of a crippled woman. Jesus healed her in the synagogue – and it was on the sabbath, and there were those who weren't at all happy about that. Jesus accused them of hypocrisy – they would happily care for their animals, so why do they object to his caring for this woman? We don't know how long she had lived with her condition, nor whether she had been ignored or overlooked, but Jesus saw what she needed and responded immediately. There is no excuse for lack of care and compassion so we have to check in case we might be missing, overlooking or ignoring someone's needs. My friends, I hope that you are doing as well as you can and assure you that you remain always in my thoughts and prayers. Every blessing, Margaret.

Call to worship: As we come now to worship, let us think about what it means to be free.

As we come to worship, let us remember what it feels like when people see our needs

As we come to worship, let us consider how we can respond to the needs of those around us.

Loving God, open our eyes, open our ears and open our hearts to the needs of those around us.

Help us to see people who are hidden in the margins and those who find it hard to have a voice.

Help us to feel the pain of those trapped by their circumstances.

Give us a vision for a renewed community and help us to model good listening and caring.

Give us wisdom, passion and energy to do your work here where we live – and may we see people transformed and set free. Amen.

Praise the Lord, my soul; praise the Lord. All my being, praise God's holy name.

God forgives; God heals and makes whole. God blesses us with love and mercy.

We praise the Lord as we come to worship.

Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise the Lord. Amen.

The words to 'God comes close' written by John L. Bell [b.1949] & Graham Maule [b. 1958]

Singing the Faith 654. The set tune may be difficult – it is rather twiddly. Try tune 69 – Ye holy angels bright.

1 The love of God comes close where stands an open door
to let the stranger in, to mingle rich and poor.

The love of God is here to stay, embracing those who walk his way.

2 The peace of God comes close to those caught in the storm,
foregoing lives of ease to ease the lives forlorn.

The peace of God is here to stay, embracing those who walk his way.

3 The joy of God comes close where faith encounters fears,
where heights and depths of life are found through smiles and tears.

The joy of God is here to stay, embracing those who walk his way.

4 The grace of God comes close to those whose grace is spent,
when hearts are tired or sore and hope is bruised and bent.

The grace of God is here to stay, embracing those who walk his way.

5 The Son of God comes close where people praise his name,
where bread and wine are blest and shared as when he came.

The Son of God is here to stay, embracing those who walk his way.

Prayers including the Lord's Prayer:

Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we can never see you in all your fullness, all your glory, all your majesty. Your greatness is beyond our understanding – your deeds beyond our imagining – your love beyond our deepest yearning.

You are the God we adore – certain, secure and sure.

You are God from one generation to the next, not waning or changing, but forever our God. Amen.

O God, all people are part of your created order, all are worthy of love and respect, care and attention, justice and equality.

Forgive us if our prejudice excludes people.

Forgive us if our views are entrenched and misguided.

Forgive us if we ever fail to see people as equals.

Forgive us if in our zeal to worship we exclude others.

And forgive us for our excuses which may stop us from responding to the needs of others – and stop us from your command to love others as you love us. Amen.

We do not understand how you can forgive us again and again, Lord – yet we have again confessed our failings, our shortcomings, our wrongdoings, our sins – and your promise still stands: ‘My child, go in peace. Your sins are forgiven.’ So let us go and serve the Lord. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 13: 10-17: (The New Testament Volume One – Gospels & Acts of the Apostles. William Barclay. Copyright William Barclay 1968)

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. There was a woman there who for eighteen years had in her an evil spirit which caused a weakness in her body. She was bent double, and she was quite unable to straighten herself. When Jesus saw her he called her forward. ‘You are released from your weakness,’ he said to her. He laid his hands in her, and then and there her body was straightened, and she praised God.

The president of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done,’ he said to the crowd. ‘Come and be healed on them, not on the Sabbath.’ The Lord answered: ‘Your religion is no more than a façade of conventional piety! Is there any of you who does not untether his ox or his ass from its stall on the Sabbath, and take it out to give it water? This woman is a daughter of Abraham. For eighteen years Satan has fettered her. Is it not right that she should be liberated from her fetters, Sabbath though it is?’ His opponents were all shamed by what he said. But the crowd all rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by Jesus.

Reflections:

This story of the woman is both immediate and distant. It is immediate because we can feel the pain and isolation of the affected woman – yet it is also distant because we could not reproduce the healing that Jesus enacts in the synagogue on the Sabbath. So what does this story say to us? Jesus highlights the fact that this woman had been attending the synagogue regularly in her condition for

eighteen years, yet no-one seems to have noticed her or helped her. I wonder if there are people in our communities who have been around for ages – and we have grown used to seeing them as they are – yet while they need us to reach out to them in a practical way, we no longer really see them and their needs may go unnoticed.

When we hear a story like this, we do not want to imagine that we would be anything like those Pharisees. We don't want to think that we might react as they did. It's more likely that we assume that when we saw the woman we would immediately respond to her needs. But is this true or do we assume too much? When we see someone do something different and break the rules we are used to keeping – as Jesus did here in healing her on the Sabbath – it can be difficult for us to deal with – even when the outcomes are so positive. Do our structures and traditions ever get in the way of our seeing and responding to needs?

Meditation of the woman healed on the Sabbath. (A Most Amazing Man – Year C. Written by Nick Fawcett. Copyright 2009 Nick Fawcett)

He helped me to walk tall, literally!

For the first time in years, I could hold my head up in public, meet people eye to eye – and it was truly wonderful.

But it wasn't just my body he set free, it was my mind and my spirit – for there, too, more than I ever realised, I'd been imprisoned, crippled by a false view of life: of myself, the world and God.

Mind you, I wasn't the only one, not by a long way.

Take that leader of the synagogue, though he couldn't see it, he was in a worse state still.

Believe it or not, he was furious when Jesus healed me, absolutely livid.

And why?

Because it was the Sabbath, the day of rest. Ridiculous isn't it, but he was genuinely incensed, convinced Jesus had committed some mortal sin, an affront against God.

The terrible thing is, he was sincere, his indignation all too real – tragic!

Don't let that happen to you.

However strong your convictions, don't put them before people.

However firm your beliefs, don't put them before God.

It's the spirit of the law that matters, not the letter – lose sight of that and you've lost everything.

Argue if you like, but one thing I know: Jesus saw my need and set me free.

How about you?

Prayers:

Redeemer Christ, save us from turning faith into rules and regulations, a matter of outward observance, of doing things by the book.

Guard us from intolerant and inflexible attitudes or from being preoccupied with incidentals rather than with what really counts – a life lived for you.

Help us to celebrate the freedom you died to bring, rather than to impose, on ourselves and on others, fresh burdens of our own. Amen.

We are so thankful, Lord, that you see us for what we are – for who we are – and for where we are. You know us by name – you know us through and through. Ashamed as we of ourselves at times, we are thankful that you stick with us, persevere with us, encourage our good intentions and forgive our failings.

We are thankful for all the help, support and guidance we have been given.
We are thankful that people throughout our lives have introduced us to you, to your ways, to your love, to your power and glory.
We are thankful that, in your name, people have noticed us and picked us up and guided us.
We are thankful that you have led others to lead us and to reach out to us.
We are thankful for the rich history recorded in the Bible – stories of prophets, priests and kings – stories of love, help and healing.
We give you thanks and praise, Lord God, for all the ways – and all the people through whom – you are revealed to us. Amen.

The words to ‘O God, you search me and you know me’ written by Bernadette Farrell [b. 1957] and based on Psalm 139. Singing the Faith 728

1 O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down you are before me:
ever the maker and keeper of my days.

2 You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
and with love everlasting you besiege me:
in every moment of life or death, you are.

3 Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
you have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past and future, too.

4 Although your Spirit is upon me,
still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you:
Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

5 For you created and you shaped me,
gave me life within my mother’s womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:
safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

Close:

Whatever we face, we do not face it alone.
Wherever we go, we do not journey alone.
However we suffer, we do not bear it alone.
Whoever we are and wherever we go
and however we journey,
we go in peace, in hope and in faith,
for we go with Christ, who always goes with us. Amen.