

Morningside Sermon 10.30am 21/8/22

Being set free

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

It is not so very long ago in Scotland, certainly in most of our living memory, when Sunday, the Sabbath was a day of pious rest to some, or stultifying boredom and restriction to others. Outwith going to one or two services in Church, and Sunday School for the young (usually in the afternoon, children were expected to sit quietly throughout the morning service), there was little else to do. Shops were shut, public transport limited. Games forbidden, radios switched off, and no whistling. Strict sabbath observance was not an invention of the Presbyterians. Medieval Roman Catholic church records are full of Sunday restrictions, and even the often-assumed lax Episcopalians upheld rigorously and punished vigorously any Sunday infringements.

There's an almost horrifying evocation of an early Victorian Sunday from the 1830s. "It would be impossible to describe the feeling which was created in my mind by the weekly recurrence of our Sabbatic observances. All of a sudden everything I had been doing last week had become wicked: Latin, Greek, Mathematics (well, Mathematics...), were now wicked; so were marbles, 'tig' and races; so were walking, except to church, laughing, singing, except psalms, playing the flute, 'fiddle', or any instrument of music, reading newspapers (specially wicked), or anything except the Bible and 'good' books. There was scarcely anything that was safe to do from our rising in the morning until our going to bed at night...To me the day was a terror...and I knew the doom of sabbath-breakers."ⁱ

As the late eminent New College Church Historian Alec Cheyne comments: "Rooted in a static, mainly agrarian society, it was often a baneful anachronism in the mobile new world of industry and large towns. Its rigid application to modern Scotland of precepts devised for Palestinian Jews

in pre-Christian times betokened an attitude which was not only unhistorical but also essentially disloyal to the spirit of the New Testament.”ⁱⁱ

There is nothing to be gained by seeking a return to the strict Sabbath of yesteryear, though, as many of us learned during lockdown, there is maybe something to be learned from a more disciplined period of time each week, each day, to rest, pause, concentrate on what, and who, really matters.

Even in the strict Sabbaths of centuries ago, in the changing of life’s rhythms, in the going to church, in the thinking about things of the Spirit, the opportunity to reframe the world for a moment, and wonder, is no bad thing. In fact, it is a very good thing that our rushing world needs, regularly, to remember. A writer in the 1820s notes, walking home from church: “We went home quieter than we came...we thought of other things.”ⁱⁱⁱ

‘We thought of other things’...like, perhaps, what Jesus came to say and do about the Sabbath. Like offering the gift of freedom.

In our story from Luke, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and seeing a crippled woman, bent over for eighteen years, He calls her forward, lays His hands upon her, heals her and tells her, “Woman, you are set free...”

Jesus doesn’t talk about healing, or curing, but of being set free.^{iv}

This poor, disability-bound woman is blessed and set free. It is as if Jesus opens the stage curtains wider to reveal what is really at the heart of His ministry. He draws open the curtains from deep within the tradition of His people, using a richer vocabulary to describe what has happened. The language of freedom is the language of the Israelite Exodus. One of the main reasons the Jews kept the Sabbath was a reminder that God had once set them free from slavery. Jesus reminds His listeners that the Sabbath is about freedom living.^v

The French philosopher Rousseau opens his book *Social Contract* with the words, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."

Not that freedom shouldn't have responsibilities that guide and protect, but that our freedom shouldn't be chained. Chained by enslavement to doing our own thing without consideration of others. Which has social, environmental, economic, political and other repercussions. Freedom is always a balancing act between rights and responsibilities. We have to work out, and work at, our practise of freedom. For the Christian, that will mean consistently wondering about and acting on thinking, believing and doing something about the things that that really matter to God. For that synagogue leader confronting Jesus, Jesus points out that he might be doing too little on the Sabbath. He might think he is keeping the rules, but he is overlooking some of the real and basic needs of people in his congregation. Sabbath is about freedom, to recalibrate our lives in what we believe God is calling us to do and to be, for ourselves as individuals, for ourselves as a Church, for ourselves as a community, and for ourselves as a world.

What is God saying to us today? Are we using our God-given freedom to do too much, or to do too little?

I wonder if it might be the case that this Sabbath of rest God has gifted to us is full, rather than empty. Not full of the usual hectic sense of busyness that blights so much of life because we are afraid of quiet, and rest, and silence. But rather, full of the things that matter to God.

I wonder if, drawing from the reading from Jeremiah, God gives us the freedom of the Sabbath to use our imaginations; to let our bodies, and our minds, and our spirits to freewheel a little, beyond the constraints and demands of everyday life, so that we might, even in this little hour here on Sunday, think of other things. What might it be that God is calling us to pluck up in our lives, in our world, or to pull down? What might it be that God is calling us to destroy and overthrow in

our lives, in our world? And what might it be, in this time of Sabbath rest when our feet are off the accelerators, and off the brakes, that God might be calling us with our imagination to build and to plant?

This is what God wants for God's children: to be set free, and to use the hearts and ears and eyes of our imagination to sense and be caught by the hints of hope that God continues to offer to us, and to our world.

Even in these days when news, whether it is in our personal lives, or in the life of our world, lurches from crisis to calamity, and disaster to despair, those hints of hope, that promise of liberation from the bondage of pain and suffering and meaninglessness and doubt, come again and again and again. Trapped though we might feel, by environmental, economic or emotional cages, God whispers, and sometimes shouts, the song of freedom, until we hear the tune, and sing it for ourselves and for our world.

Here in Church today you may be a first-time visitor, wondering what this place is like, and what this Church has to offer. You may be a weekly worshipper, wondering if this might be the day, after many, that you might hear, and be heard, see and understand what your faith is going to mean for you.

Perhaps this will be the time when you hear again, for the first time, the good news that you need no longer be locked up in a small, shrunken world of pain, or debt, or loneliness, or grief, or anger, or frustration, or weariness, or hurt. God sings the song of freedom that will, by yourself, or with others, but always with God, help you to cope, and to rise up, and to overcome, and to be set free. We forget, but each Sabbath, each Sunday, the persistent song comes to tell us again, and again, and again, that we will be free. God shaped us for freedom; even if at times we have to live caged lives.

Maya Angelou, an African-American poet and civil rights activist, wrote a poem called *Caged Bird*.

It describes the opposing experiences between two birds: One is able to live in nature as it pleases, while a different caged bird suffers in captivity. It sings both to cope with its circumstances and to express its own longing for freedom.

*A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

*The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.*

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown*

*but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

Jesus comes to set us free from whatever cages us, to
acknowledge, His gift if we have it now; or to sing for the gift
until, at last, it comes into our lives.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ J C Smith and W Wallace (eds.), Robert Wallace: Life and Last Leaves, pp48-49

ⁱⁱ A C Cheyne, The Transforming of the Kirk, p31

ⁱⁱⁱ J Brown, Horae Subsecivae, pp143-146

^{iv} Abigail W Kocher, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol 2, p32

^v *ibid*