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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : August 25th, 2019
“Tenth Sunday after Trinity”

TRINITY 10, 25TH AUGUST 2019

I was chatting this week to a priest I have known for many years and we were reflecting on our varied ministries. “It’s healing and wholeness that so many people desperately want” she said. And I could only agree. For a priest, as with many others such as doctors, it is an awesome privilege to share in people’s fears about their health, their wellbeing. It is something that is so basic and fundamental. If we feel well we can take on the world. If we feel under the weather everything else can be a burden. It is a rare person who can ignore their ailments and cheerfully carry on with their lives. And of course healing is the prime focus of Luke, the doctor, as a theme running through his Gospel. After last week’s tricky Gospel text in Luke, with its pessimistic view of the world of Jesus’ time which has many echoes for our world today, it is good to move onto the more straightforward yet moving story of Jesus encountering the crippled woman.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. There is a sense of urgency. He is in a hurry. Nonetheless, he notices someone whom everyone else ignores: a woman weighed down for many years in body and spirit. Upon meeting her, Jesus shows immediate compassion on the Sabbath to the woman, so badly crippled for 18 years. She is his main preoccupation in this account. Healing is a strong priority of Jesus and nothing, in the way of rules or conventions, must stand in the way of God’s restoring love. But the ‘jobsworth’ Jewish leaders roundly criticize Jesus, reminding him that he shouldn’t really be doing anything at all on the Sabbath, let alone the major task of healing someone. Jesus rightly shows real anger with his robust reply. He calls them ‘hypocrites’, accusing them of claiming to have higher standards than is the case. Actually he goes on to remind them that they all do some work on the Sabbath, even if only the necessary work of watering and feeding their animals – animals in reality being far less precious than this Jewish crippled woman.

As we think about her predicament, we realize that the crippled woman would always have had her eyes fixed on the floor in front of her. When Jesus released her back, she could at last look up and look around with a wonderful new freedom. Jesus’ healing

touch sets her free to worship the living God – but immediately Jesus is faced with ‘a populist, rigorist agitation’ as one scholar puts it – against doing this on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders were all equally locked with a cripplingly narrow field of spiritual vision. They had reduced the keeping of the law to a complicated set of detailed rules and could no longer see its spirit and essence, guiding people to love God and love one another. Do we ever find ourselves crippled in our thinking and living? Grumbling about everything, wishing for things we can’t have or being so set in our ways which means we are stuck and unable to look up and around? If we haven’t looked up to God’s face for ages, we might find we’re stuck in the ‘head down’ position. God offers today to release us for it is he who can put his healing hands on our lives and set us free once again.

Of late we have all become more and more aware of our beautiful yet fragile world and the huge problems which it faces, many of which seem to be absolutely insoluble: a state of affairs which might easily lead many of us to feel despair. But perhaps this morning we can take heart from what a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay, wrote in a little book called ‘The Christian Priest Today’ written 50 years ago. True, he is writing for clergy but what he says is equally applicable to everyone in a church where today there is increasing collaboration between clergy and lay people. It may give us all encouragement to realise that what we are able to do for one person will always make a huge difference – just as Jesus healed the one crippled woman amongst the huge crowds he encountered. This is what he wrote in one section:

“Amidst the vast scene of the world’s problems and tragedies, you may feel that your own ministry seems so small, so insignificant, so concerned with the trivial. What a tiny difference it can make to the world that you should run a Sunday school or preach to a few people in a church or visit baptism families with seemingly small result. But consider: the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God. Let that be your inspiration. Consider our Lord himself. Amidst a vast world with its vast empires and vast events and tragedies, our Lord devoted himself to a small country, to small things and to individual men and women, often giving hours of time to the very few or to the one man or woman – to the one woman of Samaria, one Nicodemus, one Martha, one Mary, one Lazarus, one Simon Peter, one crippled woman” – so let that be your inspiration and guide.

“Lord of heaven and earth, as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer, give us patience and courage never to lose hope but always bring our prayers before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord”.