

**READING:** *Hebrews 12.18-29*

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.')

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL: Luke 13.10-17**

**Alleluia.**

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

**Alleluia.**

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

## Sermon- 10<sup>th</sup> After Trinity, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2025

*May I speak...*

The origins of the word “religion” are controversial amongst scholars. It certainly comes from the Latin *religio*, which in turn comes from *relegere*. But why those words should signify what we mean by “religion” is not clear. Cicero apparently thought it meant “relegere” as in “read over again”, which is a tempting explanation for anyone involved in the careful reading of the Bible which we undertake in our church services. Other Classical authors, including early Christians, believed it was connected with “legere” in the sense of being tied. We still have this meaning in our modern language – a ligature wraps around something, and a ligament is the tissue which ties a bone to another bone. They believed that “religion” meant, therefore, the thing which ties us to God. Modern etymologies have suggested that its meaning may be “being bound by spiritual rules and duties” – tied in that sense.

I mention this matter of doubt because the way today’s Gospel is concerned with binding and untying. It is a curious combination of elements – we might think of it as a healing story, or an exorcism story, or a dispute with the Pharisees over the Law. There are plenty of examples of each kind of story in the Gospels, and we see elements of them here. Whilst Jesus is teaching, a woman appears who is physically ill and in need of healing, just as in the story of the woman with the flux, or the blind man who called to Jesus by the side of the road. But we are also told that she has “a spirit” which has been causing her ailment, rather like the possessed man whose devils Jesus cast into the Gadarene pigs. When he heals her, Jesus is confronted by the leader of the synagogue, who complains that he has broken the Law, just as when Jesus’ followers pick corn on the Sabbath or eat without ritually washing their dishes. These three strands are intertwined in various ways in the Gospels, and here we see them all together – a three-fold cord, to quote from Ecclesiastes.

And these themes or elements are combined together by a set of imagery which Jesus uses to describe what is happening – images of binding and untying. The story introduces a woman who “has a spirit which had crippled her for eighteen years”. The original Greek text uses the term “*pneuma astheneias*”, meaning a spirit of illness or ailment – intriguingly the other uses of this word in Greek imply an illness which holds you back or stops you doing what you need to do. Jesus speaks to her and says “you are set free” – again, the word in the Greek is interesting. *Apolelytai*, connected to the Greek verb *luo* which we discussed a few weeks ago: “to loose”. The King James Bible translates this as “woman, you are loosed”. He describes the healing in terms of being untied from the thing which was stopping her. Noticing these two words makes more sense of the argument which happens between Jesus and the head of the synagogue.

The leader complains that this is inappropriate on the Sabbath, and that there are six other days to do this kind of healing. Jesus replies with a counter-argument from the Law:

*“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?”*

This is not simply an example plucked from the air. Jesus is not saying “let’s stop arguing about religion and talk about being nice to animals instead”. He is pointing out an ongoing controversy in the interpretation of the Bible. The tradition of interpretation and argument which the rabbis carried on covered questions exactly like this. The synagogue leader has effectively said “this is wrong – I invoke the verse that says you should rest on the Sabbath”. Jesus has replied “That is inconsistent – I invoke the discussion about whether it is work to untie an animal”. You can see how that would be an interesting problem in the Law: if someone is an oxherd or a farmer, then leading out the animals is definitely work, not rest. But it is creating rest and refreshment for the animals – the labour of untying them and taking them to water is thus fulfilling the Law of rest in a deeper sense. (I must admit I don’t know the details of this dispute, but I bet you could find examples in the Talmud.)

So Jesus has pointed out that devout members of the synagogue literally untie their animals to give them rest and relief on the Sabbath, implying that if we do this for animals, how much more should we do this for people. He uses the language of tying and untying to make the parallel clear:

*And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”*

In fact we can even risk a guess at which Biblical verses Jesus and the synagogue leader quoted at each other. The commandment about the Sabbath appears in a couple of places in slightly different forms. In Exodus 20, it says:

*<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: <sup>11</sup> for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.*

In Deuteronomy 5, the same commandment appears, but with a slightly different explanation:

*<sup>12</sup> Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee. <sup>13</sup> Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: <sup>14</sup> but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. <sup>15</sup> And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.*

I think Jesus may have been pointing out that the Scriptures don't just say the Sabbath is for rest, they say it is because of God's liberation of the people of Israel. What he has done on the Sabbath has not broken the principle of rest, but increased it. More than that, the Gospel says that he called the woman over to him, laid a hand upon her and told her that she was set free.

Deuteronomy says that the Sabbath is to commemorate deliverance from Egypt brought by God's "mighty hand" and "stretched out arm". He has re-enacted the original cause of the Sabbath in front of everyone at the synagogue, and in the process hinted at whose hand they have seen in front of them.

So the unbinding which Jesus performs in this passage shows us something about the nature of our religion. It is one of freedom, of liberation – not of a self-centred cutting loose from all responsibilities so we can become bound by our own whims and wishes. The story does not suggest that religion itself is wrong. Jesus fulfils the Scriptures, and argues with the leader using their shared knowledge of the commandments. He does not say that it's all nonsense, we should just be as kind to people as we are to animals. But he does suggest that the leader of the synagogue has become so tightly and conscientiously bound that he has forgotten what he is bound to. Our own religious tradition is full of this paradox – we sing "I bind unto myself this day, the strong name of the Trinity", or "bind us together, Lord...with love" as in doing so we celebrate the Saviour who unbound us from sin. We pray the collect which names our God as the one "whose service is perfect freedom". We observe the customs of coming to church, of prayer and reading the Scriptures, because these small ties can keep us close to the presence which frees us. Amen.