

I must admit that, when I started my Theology degree, there were two books in the bible that I thought I'd try to avoid if I could. One of them was Hebrews! It didn't work out quite like that, of course.

All three of our readings this morning have a common thread, that of renewal. God had made a covenant, a promise to Moses, giving him the laws and commandments to follow. Then, about 600 years or so before Jesus appeared, Jeremiah had been called to be God's prophet at a time when surrounding, aggressive races were posing a national threat to the people of God. About a hundred years before this, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had witnessed the destruction of the people of Israel in the North no doubt because they disobeyed God's word and worshipped idols. Now Jeremiah is appointed to issue dire warnings of similar punishment to Jerusalem. Jeremiah receives God's reassurance that he is with him always in time of danger and he touches Jeremiah's mouth to sanctify his words and actions. Jeremiah continued to scatter about prophecies and oracles of doom, but to no avail as God eventually led the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem. The old covenant with Moses seems gone but Jeremiah promises a New Covenant between God and the faithful remnant of the people, a promise which is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

Our Gospel story is about this new covenant. At this healing, which follows closely on the heels of several related incidents, Jesus's opponent is the leader of the synagogue, one of the religious elite. Jesus had been having quite a time bashing religious leaders and he had warned his disciples of the hypocrisy of them. It seems that Jesus is implicitly singling out leaders of the synagogue and all similar opponents as prime examples of those who stand in need of much repentance. Jesus heals on the Sabbath and is opposed by religious leaders and Jesus defends his actions by asking whether it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, elsewhere pointing out that it is permissible to pull an ox out of a ditch on the Sabbath, an argument similar to that in our Gospel reading of today.

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? Christians today tend to treat the matter of holy observance casually. For most Christians, such observance involves, at very best, an hour of public worship each week. Outside that hour, we feel free to engage in work, recreation, and shopping. I wonder if shopping on a Sunday is the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of pulling an ox out of a ditch on the Sabbath? But it is far too easy to lose that sense of holy time, time to honour God. Being set free from the ancient law does not free us from responsibility; if the ruler of the synagogue erred by being too legalistic about the Sabbath, we are more likely to err by being too casual about the ways and times that we honour God.

This is Jesus's last appearance in a synagogue in this Gospel. It is clear that opposition to him is mounting, and such opposition is intensified because of his victories over his opponents in the verbal jousting that accompany his healings. Notice that, for all the indignation on the part of the leader of the synagogue, he does not express surprise at Jesus's healing ability, but accepts it as normal.

The woman had been crippled for eighteen years, half a lifetime in an age when life expectancy is short. A bent posture of this magnitude would interfere with everyday tasks and social relationships. It would put a strain on organs of the body, affecting health in various ways. She is forced to spend life looking down at the ground rather than up at the sky. She cannot look people in the eye. But the woman came for worship rather than healing and does not approach Jesus or request to be healed, nor is there any mention of the woman's faith. It is Jesus's initiative; it is Jesus's call to the woman that sets the stage for this healing. Laying on of hands is usually accompanied by prayer, but no mention is made of prayer here. Her healing is immediate. She stands straight and begins to praise God. It is almost as if Jesus seizes the opportunity of a crippled woman appearing in the synagogue to make an important point about slavish observance of a code of laws, so it seems that the actual healing is a secondary element in this passage.

The synagogue leader does not criticise Jesus directly, nor the woman either, who, after all, did not request this healing. Instead, he addresses the crowd and delivers an indirect rebuke both to Jesus and to the woman. Even though we understand that he was wrong, we must admire his willingness to carry out what he believed to be his Godly responsibility to uphold the Sabbath even at the risk of having to battle words with Jesus. The Fourth Commandment prohibits work on the Sabbath. It cites the example of God, who rested on the seventh day, and requires that the day be kept holy. Not only are Jewish people prohibited from working on the Sabbath, but they are also prohibited from working their servants or animals. Even today, Sabbath, along with food regulations, more than anything, help to define the Jewish people. What constitutes work on the Sabbath remains an ongoing discussion among rabbis, who now have elaborate rules for proper observation of the Sabbath.

The synagogue leader's complaint is rooted in the chronic nature of this woman's illness. She has been suffering for eighteen years, is not acutely ill, and is in no danger of dying. The purpose of the Sabbath is to honour God, so why can't Jesus honour God by keeping the Sabbath holy, i.e. free from work, and heal the woman once the Sabbath is ended? Good question! If the healing were to be delayed for a few hours, the Sabbath would be honoured and the woman would be healed—two for the price of one!

We have become so accustomed to this story that we too easily dismiss the honest, if misguided, concerns of the synagogue leader. If this man were a fool or a knave, the story would lose force. But he holds a responsible position and is trying to uphold what he understands to be holy. What he fails to understand is that acts of compassion are holy. It is as if the Torah, the Jewish law, intended to reveal God's will, has become a veil over his eyes. Jesus has sharp words for this man, but elsewhere he also has sharp words for others; Martha, Peter, and his own mother, for example. The fact that Jesus rebukes a person does not necessarily mean that the person is a scoundrel. Every person in a position of authority struggles with appropriate limits and enforcement of standards. Where do you draw the line? What exceptions do you allow? What consequences do you impose for failure to meet standards? Parents, teachers, employers, supervisors, the legal profession and religious

leaders struggle with such issues. In this story, Jesus calls us not to become slaves to the rules to the extent that we lose sight of the person in need. It is a Godly thing to help such a person. Again elsewhere, Jesus says “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”.

“You hypocrites!” Jesus says “Doesn’t each one of you free his ox or his donkey from the stall on the Sabbath, and lead him away to water?” Whilst the synagogue leader addressed his criticism to the crowd rather than to Jesus, Jesus responds directly to him and his kind. If the synagogue leader intended to establish his authority by addressing the crowd, Jesus quickly establishes that it is he rather than the synagogue leader who is in charge. Thus Jesus is demonstrating the necessary shift from the ancient, rigid, rule-bound priesthood derived from the Covenant of Moses to the priesthood of the New Covenant to be found in his teachings about love and concern for others. We need to renew our view about our relationship to God and to others in the light of this.

What has all this to do with baptism? After all this morning’s baptism is one of the most important aspects of this morning’s service. Our epistle reading from Hebrews seems rather tortuous, to put it mildly, but it is in fact, a comparison between the Old Covenant which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai and the New Covenant in Jesus, given initially to the people of Mount Zion, which is the hill upon which Jerusalem was built. Central to the teachings in Hebrews is the building of the new church emerging from the ancient one, and in particular, the most important issues of the new Priesthood and especially Baptism. Baptism, of course, is the means by which all individual people, not *just* the priesthood, can share in the new covenant, the promise of eternal salvation to all. In Hebrews, baptism is referred to as an ‘enlightenment,’ the author of Hebrews using clear baptismal imagery where he talks about “hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.”

I notice that Godfrey has given us a quotation from Søren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, in today’s pew-sheet. Kierkegaard also famously said that we all need to take a leap of faith, and that into the dark. Whilst this leap into the dark is true in one respect – no human can ever truly know the nature of God – it is rather more true to say that it is a leap into light, from darkness into enlightenment.

Amen