

## **SERMON ST PHILIP'S – SUNDAY 21 AUGUST 2016**

**Rupert Steele**

On a superficial reading of today's Gospel, Jeremy Hunt might conclude that Our Lord is in favour of a seven day NHS. The woman with a back disability is cured on the Sabbath even though her ailment was not urgent or life threatening.

However, it seems unlikely that St Luke included this story in his Gospel, or that Jesus said those words, with the express intention of assisting the Secretary of State and the British Medical Association in resolving their differences.

Nor do I think that this passage gives us a lot of guidance on the thorny question of the extent to which Sunday trading should be allowed. Leaving aside the difference between Saturday and Sunday, Jesus seems to be telling us that it is good to do good things on the Sabbath, but he recognises that the day is special. So the extent to which we allow trading on a Sunday, which diminishes the specialness of the day, but helps busy people organise their lives and creates wealth, which helps to relieve poverty, is not something where we can find an answer in the Bible. We will need to balance those factors ourselves.

Indeed, it is generally wise to be cautious about taking an individual passage of scripture and using it to answer a modern dilemma. It is unlikely that Jesus would have been thinking about the precise circumstances of our issue, when speaking nearly two thousand years previously. A much better approach is to take the broad sweep of our Lord's words as general guidance as to what we should do.

And this passage is one of a number which say broadly, "Don't take the religious law too literally; focus on love instead". It's clear that love for the woman with the ailment means helping her; in Jesus' case by dramatically healing her. It is frankly silly, if the opportunity to help in this way arises, for people to say "you should not have dispensed love on this day".

It's worth looking at the text a bit more closely. I can't do New Testament Greek myself, but I understand that the same Greek work is used by Jesus in verse 12 "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" and verse 15 "Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox". You could perhaps use "unbind" or the old verb "loose" in both places, which doesn't make the English quite so clear but brings alive Jesus' point.

He's saying "you are criticising me for unbinding this woman from her ailment on the Sabbath, but you are quite happy to unbind your own ox that day so it can drink. If it's good enough for an ox, it's good enough for this woman who has endured 18 years of pain".

At one level, the detailed regulations in the Law about the Sabbath were intended to be merciful. There was an exception for urgent medical attention. Animals' needs could be attended to. Perhaps the mistake was to set these rules down in very great detail, so that the principle was lost. Jesus' rebuke is to say put love first, and let the detail look after itself.

The mistake that Jesus corrects is one that Christianity has itself repeated through the ages in many ways. Galileo was threatened with torture because he thought that the earth went round the sun and had made observations with his telescope which suggested this was a much more likely theory than Aristotle's earth-centred system of circles upon circles.

For many years divorced people were treated with an astounding lack of love, often being denied the sacraments. And more recently, the church has been similarly judgemental around gay people.

This January Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury chaired a conference of the Anglican Communion to discuss policies on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, with the African churches adamant that they could not remain in communion with the US Episcopalian church, which has a liberal attitude to such matters. He successfully negotiated a compromise that kept the Communion together, albeit with the US church suspended from decision making structures for three years.

But most notably, he gave a press conference where he chided his fellow prelates for putting the issue ahead of God's love for his people. He said: "It's a constant source of deep sadness that people are persecuted for their sexuality. I don't have the authority or right to speak on behalf of everyone; what's in the communiqué is in the communiqué. But I want to take this opportunity personally to say how sorry I am for the hurt and pain, in the past and present, that the church has caused and the love that we at times completely failed to show, and still do, in many parts of the world including in this country.

"And I think the worst of that is that it causes people to doubt that they are loved by God; failures of human beings are one thing, but to shut people off from the love of God is completely different. So I want to say how sorry I am about that."

The archbishop's words are about gay people, but could equally well apply to the many other groups in society, which at various times the church has sought to cut off from the love of God.

It is sad that the archbishop needed to make those remarks. The Gospel is clear. Not only with today's story but countless others. We have Jesus' summary of the law. We have the beatitudes. And yet despite the clarity of the Gospel as a whole, the church has often sought to keep people from the love of God.

The woman was untied from her ailment. We ask that Jesus will help us untie ourselves from failure to love people who are a little different; that he will help us to put the summary of the law at the centre of our hearts and be guided by the Gospel of love, peace and compassion that is at the centre of Our Lord's teaching.

Amen