

We are working our way through four chapters in the Gospel of Luke (13-16) which are central to our understanding of the person of God: *Who is God?* and *What does He expect of us?* Jesus helps us understand His Father, and who else would know Him best?!

I love archaeology and subscribe to the Biblical Archaeology Review. This month carries an article titled "The Face of God". The opening paragraph reads, *For millennia, humans have attempted to depict the Divine. (This) issue ... offers some intriguing examples of this phenomenon. First, explore male figurines from sites in ancient Judah, which might represent the Israelite God, Yahweh. Then examine early Christian depictions of Jesus in which he holds what looks like a magic wand—but is it?*

Archaeology stirs the imagination; excavating a male figurine and suggest it **might** represent Yahweh, the God of Israel, distracts readers from Biblical advice, not to make any carved images of God¹, because God is beyond human imagination and cannot be reduced to an image. Similarly, the suggestion that a stick in the hand of a person in a portrait *looks like* a magic wand in Christ's hand, is also misleading in our understanding of the Divinity of Christ. So we turn to what is reliable, the Word of God.

We started with the "why?" question. Jesus says, you ask, "*Why does God allow bad things, killings, murder, falling buildings to happen to innocent people?*", when you should be asking, "*Why don't I respond to God's initiative to build a relationship with Him, so that I can then better understand/appreciate what is happening?*"

We discovered, God's understanding of "repentance" is not about grovelling about the past and paying our dues for past "sins", its about grasping His future! *Forget that you misunderstood me in the past. Now hold my hand and I will take you to the future I have planned for you!*

Last Sunday we discovered, *suffering* does not imply *sinfulness*. The fact that a woman was possessed by an **evil** spirit, did not make that person evil, nor was her disability the result of sin and evil in her past.

¹ Exodus 20:4

Our passage today begins at verse 14, *But the leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant. And what exactly upset him? ...that Jesus had healed (the woman double bent over for 18 years), on the Sabbath day.*

As leader of the Synagogue, he was only enforcing the rules. God's advice (prefer not to use "commandment") was, *Remember to observe the Sabbath (the Seventh Day) as a Holy day. Six days a week are for your daily duties and your regular work, but the seventh day is a day of Sabbath rest before the Lord your God. On that day you, your family and anyone living with you, are to do no work of any kind.²*

The man could have continued quoting Moses, *The reason being, in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day He rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as Holy.*

The leader was right in quoting the first part, *work for six days, then rest ...on the seventh*, but he chose not to use the words, **before the Lord**, as it did not suit his purpose. This is very dangerous territory.

In his farewell speech to the elders of the Ephesian church, Paul says, *"Therefore I testify to you this day ... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God",³ i.e. I did not shrink from teaching you what might be difficult for you to understand and accept, and I was not ashamed to do so.*

The synagogue leader's single statement highlights the problem which has bothered the human race from the beginning: we choose what we read about God, we choose what we hear about God, we choose what we believe about God, we choose to live the way we think God wants us to live, and then, from our point of view, we blame God for everything that goes wrong.

It starts with chopping off parts of God's word we find uncomfortable or inconvenient: most people refer to the Sabbath as, **a day of rest**, conveniently leaving out, **before the Lord**.

² Exodus 20:8-10

³ Acts 20:26-27

That's what differentiates us as a people of God from others, **a day of rest before the Lord**, which means, praising God for Who He is, what He does for us, and what He means to us. When the double-bent-over woman was healed by Jesus, guess what she did? **And HOW she praised God!**, wrote Luke. What was happening in the Synagogue on that day, was exactly what God said should happen: people resting from the daily grind of work, and praising God for who He is, to all of us and to each one of us.

Authors write with meaning and purpose using key words, repetition and literary devices. We miss the Authors' message when we do not grasp their writing style. The short account of Jesus' healing on a Sabbath is remarkably abundant in meaning. Some of them are:

- There are two references to the woman's **healing**. The second one repeats the word used to "**untie**" a donkey (13:12, 15-16)
- Her disease is twice said to be **caused by an evil spirit**, the second time Jesus specifies it as Satan (13:10, 16), because He knows the person!
- Twice the healing is said to result in **praise** to God (13:13, 17).
- The idea of **straightening** herself is repeated (13:11, 13).
- Perhaps the most unusual repetition in the story is the expression "**18 years**"⁴ (Luke 13:11, 16).
- The expression "**daughter of Abraham**" appears only here in the Bible.

The unique language "**daughter of Abraham**" not only reconnects the woman to her rightful identity, it is also a prompt to recall Israel's history from bondage to freedom, which started with the blood of the Lamb, who now is standing before them.

Luke shifts emphasis. There is a bigger picture. Healing and restoration are not personal. The **ENTIRE kingdom of God rejoices when one person rejoices!** As we progress into the next few chapters we shall see Luke pick up this theme in its proper context.

⁴ see Judges 2, 3 and 10.

Exploring the story from the woman's perspective, we understand that it is her community of faith who rejoice with her; her healing is a matter of communal joy!

This narrative is not told to discuss a theological issue. Rather, this is a story about the role and function of our religious traditions, our claims about what could and should be practiced on the **Sabbath**, or who is allowed within the walls of our Church community and what they do, might disallow full participation by others, as **our** special religious practices hinder inclusion.

Luke's Jesus could not be clearer or more consistent on this point. He's no Sabbath breaker! He operates well within Jewish tradition of the day, but He will not allow traditions to exclude people from access to the community where healing takes place. Many in the crowd agree.

This narrative provides space for introspection: What kind of community does God want us to be? Do our religious traditions and views on religion help us to become **that** kind of community, or do they hinder our desires? Will our traditions hinder the "daughter of Abraham," in our day, from joining us today?

Finally, what **seems** to be two disjointed metaphors, are actually very significant.

Luke catches Jesus pondering, *Now, how can I explain to you, what you have just seen and heard.*

First, understand this: The Kingdom of God is growing in scope and size the way a tiny mustard seed grows into a large healthy tree. It can be a blessing for nesting birds, and nesting birds can be a nuisance in the tree, and to the tree, sometimes destroying it.

The kingdom of God is also like a little bit of leaven which permeates the entire batch of dough. It can be a blessing in producing good quality bread, and it can be a disaster when incorrect measures creates a large size of bread, which is uncooked and inedible inside.

Both metaphors presented to us in concise form, would have been readily understood by the people in the synagogue: *Be aware! Be conscious! What seems*

to be normal and a blessing, may not be. Be aware and examine what you see and experience, because the kingdom of God can be spoilt from the outside (like the birds) or can be spoilt from within, from the inside (like unmeasured yeast).

In an honour/shame society like first-century Palestine, the public shaming of the local synagogue leader is not good ... for him, or for his ability to lead this religious and social community in this small village. There is a tendency to read Gospel narratives in ways that denigrate first-century Judaism and highlight Jesus over against his Jewish context. We should be careful to avoid this.

This text makes us question our understanding and application of Church:

- Are there distortions from Scripture we have inadvertently created, like leaving out a few words, that makes it easier for us to **do** Church, because **being** Church is difficult?
- Have we made certain traditions so sacred and hallowed, that others find it difficult to be a part of God's Church.
- Do we rejoice with people when they rejoice, and praise God as we should?
- Finally, do we spend our "sabbath day of rest, in the presence of, and dedicated to the Lord our God"?

In one of her later interviews, Mother Teresa was asked what she prayed for. Her reply was, **I do not pray for success; I ask for faithfulness.** Perhaps this should be our prayer too!

AMEN.