

Proper 16 year C 22.9.10 Ann Fraser  
*Isaiah 58.9-14, Hebrews 12.18-29, Luke 13.10-17*

I am reminded of a story from long ago about a man who went into the forest looking for an interesting bird for an experiment. He found a baby eagle, brought it home and put it in the run with his chickens. He wanted to see if he could train it to be a chicken, even though it was an eagle. He gave it chicken feed and allowed it to grow up with the chickens. The eagle complied and behaved exactly like a chicken.

A few years later a naturalist came to see the man and as he walked through the garden he exclaimed, 'that's not a chicken, it's an eagle' The man replied, 'It's no longer an eagle, it's a chicken now - I've trained it to be a chicken even though it's much bigger than the rest of the hens, it thinks it's a chicken' The naturalist was horrified and determined to rescue the eagle. The man was so convinced he'd done a good job that he agreed to let the naturalist conduct an experiment. The next morning the naturalist took the eagle and held it up and said '*Eagle, you are an eagle, you have the heart of an eagle, fly free*'. The eagle looked around for a bit and then saw the chickens eating their food and jumped down to join them. The owner said 'there you are, I told you it was a chicken'.

The naturalist was determined to have another try. The next day he took the eagle to the top of the house, held it up and said '*Eagle, you are an eagle, you have the heart of an eagle, fly free*'. This time, the eagle looked all round but when it saw the chickens, it jumped down and joined them. The owner said triumphantly, 'I told you it was a chicken'. 'No' said the naturalist, 'I am determined that this eagle will fly free.

So the next morning he took the eagle to a hill away from the houses and holding the eagle high, he said '*Eagle, you are an eagle, you have the heart of an eagle, fly free*'. The eagle looked round nervously then suddenly it trembled, stretched its wings and making the sound of an eagle, it flew. It rose higher and higher and disappeared from sight. Even though it had spent so long with the chickens and had learnt to behave like a chicken, it **was** an eagle.

The woman that Jesus healed was like that eagle, she was a real and whole person trapped inside a bent and deformed body. In her society, she was no more than just a bent and deformed body, she had no worth at all, she had accepted that and learnt to live that way. But Jesus saw beyond and through the confines of that restricting body and set her free. Jesus responded to her infirmity, even though she didn't ask for it. In his response Jesus is acting out what he has been telling us throughout the past few chapters about the Kingdom of heaven.

Everyone is part of God's kingdom, there are no barriers to keep us from God's love, except of our own making. Jesus called the woman to Him, and chose to heal her. She was not asking for healing, she was a bent and crippled woman and that's what she accepted, she didn't seek to change.

But Jesus noticed her condition, changed it and caused an upset in the synagogue by healing her. In fact it was more than an upset, it was a near revolution.

Jesus was being revolutionary in six ways. He intended to cause a stir, and in this incident he certainly stirred it. He had tried teaching and telling them, and now was the opportunity to actually demonstrate what he meant.

First of all he spoke to a woman. Men didn't speak to women they didn't know and women didn't approach men and speak to them. Jesus was challenging the male domination of that society. Remember the incident at the well, the disciples were quite indignant that Jesus had spoken to an unknown woman.

Second this event took place in the synagogue. Women were denied access to most of the synagogue but Jesus ignored that and called a woman to the middle of a synagogue. Shocking indeed.

Then Jesus touched the woman. Jewish law would have forbidden that under what was known as the holiness code. It was meant to protect men from the sinful seductiveness of women.

Fourth, Jesus referred to the woman as a daughter of Abraham, which implied that she was a fully fledged member of the Israeli nation and that in turn gave her equal standing with the men.

Fifth, and this one is very obvious in the gospel, Jesus healed her on the Sabbath. He was challenging the law that put rules before compassion and pointing out that the healing was essential and that people are more important than rules.

Last of all Jesus challenges the ancient belief that illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. It is not the sin of the woman that caused her illness, it's due to the evil in the world. In other words, bad things can happen to good people.

The Jewish leaders remonstrated with Jesus and above all objected to him healing on the Sabbath. Jesus responded with strong language. 'You hypocrites', he said to them. Strong language indeed, that's not the sort of language polite people use with each other. Jesus must have been exasperated with those Jewish leaders, they just didn't get the message at all. God's way is centred on people not laws. The laws are meant to help us to fly like eagles, not to turn us into chickens. God is a life-giver, not a law maker.

Sometimes we ourselves are like that woman, or even like the tamed eagle. We are so conditioned in our ways that we cease to be the people that God made us to be. We are bent double with the cares and concerns of this world.

Society can have a way of making us something we are not. We strive to be like others, to get,

to win,

to own,

and we have no time to just 'be'.

We are driven by the Surrey lifestyle, the workplace deadlines, global demands to attend meetings and do more.

Life has a way of beating us down,  
using up our energy,  
wearing us out  
and making us too cynical to believe anything.

We have so many numbers and passwords to remember and we are treated by some people in such a way that we can easily feel de-humanised, just one insignificant part of a faceless whole.

We end up looking down, instead of ahead, crippled like that poor woman was. And in that state we can only see the ground under our feet, one foot at a time. We lose all vision and purpose and just exist. That woman is a metaphor of so many people. But its not meant to be like that. Jesus came to bring freedom, to give us hope for the future and to teach us how to truly love one another. The readings from Isaiah and from Hebrews today re-inforce that message. It would have been easy for Jesus to just accept as the rest of the synagogue did. that here was a crippled woman, just as they accepted here is the door or here are the benches.

I am convinced that whatever dreadful circumstance a person is suffering or whatever awful thing they have done, inside is a beautiful person made in God's image. Well, if not beautiful, at least tolerable and pleasant.

It may be well hidden, but God knows it's there and as the people of God we should be looking for that hidden person.

Remember the eagle, even though it behaved like a chicken inside it was eagle. Even though the body is bent or the mind crippled, inside is whole loving and lovely person. If we are that woman, remember Jesus heals. If we see that woman, let's pray for healing and then act as Jesus did.

Amen