

Brancepeth sermon
24 August 2025

Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17
Psalm 103:1-8

May I speak in the name of the Father,

and of the Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Our gospel reading today is often read a certain way:
as if it were Jesus versus the Jewish leaders of his day –
with *them* on the side of law,
and *him* on the side of love.

And if we read it like that,
it is really easy to side against the synagogue leader
to see him as a sort of religious jobsworth
who wants to stop Jesus doing something obviously good,
just because it is ‘against the rules’.

The problem is: that is really *not* what is going on in this story.

We need to look again, and look a bit more carefully.

Firstly, it's worth reminding ourselves of some things about Jesus' relationship to the law of Moses, the Jewish law.

We know, for instance, from other things the Bible says, that Jesus kept kosher –

that is, Jesus didn't eat pork, or seafood, or blood, or the rest;

Jesus, as a faithful Jew, kept the Jewish food laws.

We also know that he worshipped in the temple, indeed, he got angry with the moneychangers who he thought were stopping the temple being the place of prayer that it was meant to be.

But that means that Jesus was participating in all the rituals, all the sacrifices, all the patterns of worship proper to his Jewish faith.

Jesus, as a faithful Jew, kept the Jewish laws about ritual.

And Jesus said quite firmly that

he had not come to abolish the law,

not to wipe out one letter, not one stroke of a letter, from it.

The belief amongst Jesus' followers
that God was drawing Gentiles into God's people
without requiring them to follow this law
arose later,
in the decades after Jesus had ascended to his Father –
and it's *not* what our gospel story today is about.

So, whatever is going on in this story,
it's certainly not about a Jesus who despises the Jewish law,
or thinks of it as irrelevant, or outmoded, or imprisoning.

And then we need to think about the synagogue leader,
and about why he might have been so indignant at Jesus' actions.

As synagogue leader, he would have known his scriptures.

And he would have read there that the sabbath is
a rhythm established by God, a rhythm built in to creation.

He would have known that

God tells God's people to keep the sabbath holy:

to give regular space in their lives

to remembering and worshipping God.

And he would have known that, according to the same scriptures,
having one day in seven given over to rest is *good* for us,
it's part of what we need to be healthy people
and healthy communities.

So he wouldn't just have kept the sabbath
because it was a tradition,
or because it was a rule and he liked rules,
but because he wanted to *honour God*,
and keep such honouring at the heart of his people's life,
and because he wanted to *respect the rest we all need*,
and keep that rest at the heart of his people's life, too.

And perhaps he thought that, if you start chipping away at that,
however good your reasons,
it will soon all be gone,
that this will become a day like any other day,
and something really important will have been lost.

So, yes, he's indignant with Jesus.

He clearly thinks that Jesus isn't facing an emergency;
that Jesus could heal this woman on *any* day -

she's been living with this condition for eighteen years, after all,
so one day more or one day less will hardly matter.

Why is Jesus insisting on doing *one* good thing –
healing this woman –
in such a way as to get in the way of this *other* good thing –
honouring the sabbath?

Maybe *that* is what is going through this man's head.

So what *is* Jesus up to? What *is* going on?

Well, we know that Jesus saw the sabbath as
a God-given gift to humanity –
a good thing, an important thing.

But Jesus also knows that sometimes,
when you encounter someone's need, someone's pain,
you simply *have* to respond.

Sometimes, you encounter a need
that *trumps everything else that is going on.*

You might recognise that kind of experience.

You get the phone call, perhaps,
telling you that someone is seriously ill –
and all the arrangements you were making,
all the important plans you were involved in,
all the things other people were relying on you to do,
however good and proper they were,
they stop mattering in that moment,
because *all* that matters is getting in your car and *going*.
It's what you *have* to do.

And it doesn't even have to be an emergency,
a situation where you only have a short time in which to act.
Sometimes it is simply when you become *aware*
that someone is hurting,
that someone is carrying something
that you hadn't known about before,
or hadn't known was so serious –
sometimes in that kind of situation, too,
you simply *have* to respond.

That's all that matters in that moment –
and other good things, other genuinely important things,
fade into the background.

We are often told that Jesus was filled with compassion
when he encountered people in pain, people who were suffering.

In the words of our Psalm, he was
'merciful and gracious, and abounding in steadfast love'.

But it can be easy, perhaps, to think of that
as a kind of generalised benevolence or kindness.

I wonder if we should *instead* think of him as being
again and again caught up in these moments
where there is a sudden, urgent tug on his heart,
where what matters –

all that matters in that moment –
is the person in front of him and their need;
where other good things, other important things,
just fade into the background,
and he simply *has* to respond to that need,
right there and then.

So perhaps Jesus is saying to the synagogue leader, in effect,
look: you already accept that there are some things that you
have to do on the sabbath –

you *have* to give water to your thirsty animals for instance –
and you don't think of *that* as sabbath-breaking,
because it's simply something you have to do.

Well, I *have* to respond to this woman when she asks for healing.

I'm not going to check whether it's convenient;

or how it fits with my existing plans;

I'm not going to check how it fits with the synagogue timetable;

And, yes, I'm not even going to pause to work out

whether this fits with the way we observe the sabbath

and try to keep it holy,

even though I agree that sabbath rest is a good and necessary thing.

No. I'm going to respond to her need – *right now*;

I simply can't do otherwise.

And that doesn't *break* the law – far from it!

It fulfils the deepest purpose of the law.

The writer of Hebrews tells his readers,
‘See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking.’
Even when God doesn’t speak to you in fire on top of a mountain,
in thunder and lightning,
or in a stone tablets carved with laws,
see that you do not refuse when God speaks.

And, as many Jewish thinkers have said, over the years,
sometimes God speaks to us very directly through the need,
through the cries of pain that we encounter,
through the urgent compassion they awaken in us.
And when God speaks to us like that,
we should *see that we do not refuse the one who is speaking*.

So what might that mean for us here in St Brandon’s?
The beauty of our worship – it *is* a valuable thing;
and the rhythm of our life together *does* matter.
The habits that shape our worship and our life together –
they aren’t just some thoughtless routine,
but structures that support our way of life together –
they are ways of honouring God and respecting one another.

All of that is good; all of it is important.

But are we willing to be interrupted by the need we encounter?

Are we willing to respond to the need that surrounds us,
even if it disrupts our good life together?

And I have been thinking about this a lot, recently,

because of –

well, because of *everything* that is going on.

We are always surrounded by need, of course;

we are always in the midst of crises at home and abroad –

surrounded by the needs of the lonely, the sick, the poor,

by the needs of immigrants and refugees,

by the needs of those already being affected by the climate crisis,

by the needs of those who can't get the healthcare they need,

by the needs of those losing their jobs –

but just at the moment, at least to me,

it feels like the sheer *level* of need around us

has been rising, or becoming more visible,

the cries of pain around us more audible;

it is easier, even from the midst of the calm and comfort of Brancepeth
to notice the brokenness of things,
the *shakenness* of things,
as the writer of Hebrews might have put it.

Now, I don't know about you, but I feel pretty powerless
when faced with the big picture -
faced with the deep and intractable problems that mar our world,
though there *are* some things we can do,
and in another sermon I might talk about them.

But sometimes, I know, we see the brokenness of the world
in the face of a particular person -
in the pain which that particular person is experiencing
in the exclusion or isolation,
in the fear,
in the suffering written onto the face of
someone, some one particular person, that we encounter.

Jesus did not hesitate to respond to the need of
the one particular woman he encountered on that sabbath day.

He let her cries disrupt his life,
disrupt the good habits of the community he was a part of,
and call him into action on her behalf.

What might *we* be being called to do,
individually and collectively
by the particular people, the particular needs we encounter?
To whose pain might *we* be being called to respond,
within and beyond our congregation?

Whose need, whose cries,
should be interrupting and overriding
the laws that we have ended up living by –
yes, even the good arrangements, the wise arrangements,
the sensible arrangements – that shape our life together?

To whom might *we* be needing to respond
with an urgent and reckless compassion,
a compassion like that of Jesus?

Amen