



Sermon: - 21st August 2016

Oh, what a lovely view!

*Sometimes we stand in the way of God's work here on earth
because we only see things from our perspective.
How different do things look from God's perspective?*

Have you ever noticed that sometimes what you see depends on what you're looking for? A number of years ago my husband took my elder son fishing. Iain had been fishing before but not for a long time, I guess he wasn't the keenest fisherman. At that point in time he was working for a computing games firm and his job was to write the programming which created the water; the lochs and rivers that made up the scenery, the backdrop, for the game that they were working on. He was taking a much needed rest from work and he agreed to go fishing with his dad. It was a perfect day for it; not too bright, not too warm, and not too much wind. David looked out over the loch to watch for the fish rising. He was delighted to see evidence of quite a lot of activity near the surface of the water. He turned to Iain, and was about to say, "It looks like a great fishing day" when Iain interrupted him with, "Dad, do you see the way the light is reflected on the water, and the way the reflections move and change, isn't that amazing?" David was none too pleased that Iain was not focused on the day's fishing but when he got home and told me the story I commented that if I had been there I would probably have been looking at the view and working out how best to paint it!

Three people, one view, three different perspectives. And that reminded me of today's readings; one view, remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, three different perspectives; the crippled woman's perspective, the synagogue leader's perspective which is echoed in the ancient Hebrews perspective, and Jesus' perspective which is of course God's perspective, but there is only one which really matters here and that is God's perspective.

Let's begin with the perspective of the crippled woman. This is a very practical change in perspective. She was hampered and restricted by her affliction and her change in perspective was literal. It must have been very dramatic, from looking at the floor to standing tall: from having to contort herself to see people's faces to being able to look them in the eye without discomfort. From agony to ecstasy, from resignation to rejoicing, from inability to ability, from bondage to freedom. Her change in perspective was from constriction of vision, exclusion from normal life, from pain and difficulty, to engagement with the world and inclusion in normal life. Her story becomes a symbol and metaphor for the other differing perspectives that we see in these readings today.

Because the leader of the synagogue too was hampered and restricted by his inability to see anything but his own perspective, but his narrowness of vision was due to his mindset, not his physical condition. He was indignant about the fact that Jesus had contravened his view of acceptable Sabbath behaviour, even though the outcome is healing for this poor woman. His instinct is to stick to the letter of the law, rather than, in the spirit of the law, to allow this poor woman to receive healing. And his behaviour echoes that of the Hebrew nation we see described in Isaiah. They too were hampered and restricted by a lack of religious understanding, unable to see anything but their own perspective.

At the time Isaiah was writing the Hebrews had returned from their exile in Babylon and were struggling to make a new life in Jerusalem. Their attempts to rebuild the temple and the city were moving slowly. There were divisions in the leadership and violent quarrelling

and all this hindered their progress in re-establishing their nation. There was economic and social inequity - homelessness, hunger, lack of clothing and the powerful taking advantage of the weaker members of society. This was not the society that God had envisaged or planned when he gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. Yet in the midst of all this inequality and oppression the Hebrews were attempting to maintain their rituals of worship. And they did this in the hope that God would bless their new society.

However they, like the synagogue leader, misunderstood. If we consider the reading from Isaiah in the context of the whole chapter we see that the focus of the chapter is on the kind of worship that God wanted. This was not, as the Hebrew nation assumed, frequent worship and dutiful rituals. Nor did it follow that if they offered these God would be persuaded to help them. Rather God required something much more practical. As a result of simply following rituals the Hebrews' worship had lost much of its meaning and had become shallow, trivial, and too concerned with what they would get out of it rather than truly aiming to worship according to God's will. In the same way the leader of the synagogue was more concerned that worship should "follow the rules" than that God's will should be done. The second perspective; rules and regulations are more important than people. A view of worship which is as distorted as the woman's body was before she was healed.

The third perspective is of course God's. What does he make of the synagogue leader's intervention or the ancient Hebrews practices in worship?

The theme of food and hunger pervade Isaiah chapter 58. Fasting was a common practice for the Hebrews. But of course this could only be the case for those with enough food. To fast is to choose to go without food for a certain period of time. The poor, who struggle to find enough to eat on a daily basis, are therefore forced to fast and have no choice in the matter. Isaiah points out that as far as God is concerned fasting as a religious observance while ignoring social injustice was not true worship. The fast God required was the opposite of fasting. It was, ironically, to provide food for the hungry and if the Hebrews wanted to gain God's attention this was the way to do it, rather than observe religious rituals. The yoke referred to in verse 11 symbolizes injustice and oppression; the strong in the new community preying upon the weak, while at the same time going through the motions of worshipping God through their religious rituals, supposedly observing the Sabbath. This hypocrisy is described by Isaiah as "trampling the Sabbath".

And so we see both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament passages, that honouring the Sabbath involves not only worship but also caring for those who are in need. Salvation is incarnate in human action. The third perspective, God's perspective, is that faith without works is dead; rituals without action are meaningless.

But I would like to add a fourth perspective to our investigation into these passages. And that is our perspective. Where do we place ourselves in this story? It is always tempting to assume when we read these Bible passages that we would be with Jesus, cheering his actions, rejoicing at the healing of this woman. But if we are really honest with ourselves, if we consider how we might respond in similar situations today which side would we be on? When our rules of worship are broken? When someone we consider not our sort of person comes to church? When people, often children, behave in ways that we consider inappropriate in the service? Are we cheering from the sidelines rejoicing that God's work is being done or are we actually among those pointing the finger, resisting in some way the work of God? Is it possible that we might be, at times, more of a barrier than a believer? How does that sit with the passage from Isaiah and the fact that Jesus overturned the expectations and norms of his community in the gospel passage? Does our perspective need to change? What would it take to change our perspective?

Clearly the Sabbath is important, is still important. This principle, having a day of rest is vital for our physical and mental well-being. In today's busy culture, finding moments to rest, to retreat and to recuperate can be difficult. Perhaps that is one of the reasons our familiar rituals can be so difficult to abandon. Because they are comfortable, they are restful. We come to church looking for refreshment, looking for a safe space, looking for comfort. But I think that today, just as in Isaiah's day, just as in Jesus day, the temptation to make the rituals the important thing is very real. There is no denying that change is difficult; there is no denying that strangers may make us feel uncomfortable; there is no denying that we prefer things to be predictable. And it is right that we can express our love for God in ways that come naturally to us, and that we enjoy. But when our rituals become more important than people ... then we are in danger of "trampling on the Sabbath".

What do we do about this? How do we ensure that the worship we offer to God is acceptable in his sight? I'm afraid I have no formula to offer you. I can't replace one set of rules and regulations with another set that is more acceptable to God. I think we each have to examine our own hearts and ask ourselves what it means when God asks us to, "do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ... spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed" What does that mean for you, for me, for us here in the 21st-century, here in Lennoxton. I think it will be different for each of us but I think it matters very much that we make the effort to discover what God wants of us, how he would like us to worship him, and what means to keep our feet from breaking the Sabbath, for only then, only when we have understood that, will God bless our worship, only then will our light rise in the darkness, and our night will become like the noonday.

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