

Year C Proper 16

Luke 13:10-17

Winnie-the Pooh is one of the most loved children's characters of all time. Of course, Pooh is the bear who belongs to Christopher Robin. At the end of one Winnie-The-Pooh story we learn that Christopher Robin is soon to "go away" to school. Here's how the story goes:

Now there comes a time in everyone's life when toys and games are replaced by pencils and books. You see Christopher Robin was going away to school. Nobody in the forest

knew exactly why or where he was going, all they knew was that it had something to do with twice times and ABCs and where a place called Brazil is.

“Pooh, what do you like doing best in the world?”

“What I like best is me going to visit you and saying, ‘How about a smackerel of honey?’”

“I like doing that too, but what I like doing best is Nothing”

“How do you do Nothing?”

“Well, it’s when grown-ups ask ‘What are you going to do?’ and you say ‘Nothing’. And you go and do it.”

“I like that, let’s do it all the time.”

“You know something Pooh, I’m not going to do just Nothing anymore”

“You mean never again?”

“Well, not so much.”¹

Sabbath was the day when Jewish people did nothing. The word comes from a root meaning to stop. All work and activity was to be done on the other six days in stark contrast to the Sabbath. Teaching on the nature of the Sabbath had its source in the great Old Testament accounts of creation and the giving of the law. God rested from

¹ <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/sabbath/>

his work of creation on the Sabbath and so the people of Israel must do likewise in worship of their God.² In addition in Deuteronomy the people are instructed to observe the Sabbath because they were delivered by God from slavery in Egypt.³ There is no doubt that Jesus had the latter text in mind the day he encountered the crippled woman in the synagogue. Now we might wonder why Jesus, fully aware of the strict Sabbath observance, just didn't wait a day or two before healing the woman. After

² Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11

³ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

all she was afflicted for eighteen years. A day or two longer wasn't going to make much difference, was it? The answer to that question is no. Another day or two wasn't going to make a tremendous difference to the woman. But the day, that day, that Sabbath day was crucial to Jesus. It was important to him to meet the issue of Sabbath observance head on. Rules have their place in society. Without them we are always threatened in an imperfect world with a breaking down of order. The Church of Scotland is sometimes criticised for being a church of the law book. From the view of

those in the free church traditions, like our Baptist and Brethren friends for example, it can appear that our freedom to choose at a congregational level is unnecessarily stifled. In response it may be said that church law guarantees fairness and transparency which a free church could never guarantee. Of course, there is no right or wrong system of church governance, just flawed people trying to make their way in the new world of God's kingdom. The issue for Jesus as he encounters a difficult synagogue leader is not the quality of the law but instead the quality of the interpretation of the law.

Rules bring obligations. Obligations for the people following the rules and obligations for those who must make judgements. For imperfect leaders it is always easier to simply insist on the rules when confronted with a difficult decision. The law apparently made it easier for the synagogue ruler to ignore the needs of the poor woman. He could not see any connection between the law and the needs of the woman. One was to be enforced and the other was to be ignored. Here is a fine example of form being placed before substance. It is possible for church structures to get in the way of what matters.

It is possible for our traditions and their maintenance to take us away from our purpose. Sometimes people will say, ‘but we’ve always done it that way’, as if an unquestioning allegiance to tradition was our purpose. We need to learn lessons from the synagogue leader. Now, Jesus could have chosen to heal the woman on any day but I’m suggesting to you that he deliberately chose the Sabbath to do it. Jesus knew the law well and in particular he knew that the observance of the Sabbath was tied closely to God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt.⁴ Here

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

stood a woman in the synagogue who needed deliverance from her ailment. What would be more consistent with Sabbath observance than bringing deliverance to an afflicted person? So he healed her. More than that, he laid his hands on her! There are numerous stories in the Gospels when Jesus healed people without touching them. He did not have to lay on hands to bring healing. Here he chose to do so and as always there was a reason for doing this. The woman was ceremonially unclean because of her condition. Jesus desired to bring her contamination onto himself that

her disfigurement would become his disfigurement. By touching her and then healing her, he was visually demonstrating that the wounded and marginalised are redeemed by him. Why couldn't Jesus wait for another day? Well, that day was the perfect day for this act of deliverance.

Another aspect of this story that is significant concerns the disabled woman. Notice that she did not ask Jesus to heal her. Jesus took the initiative by calling her over and announcing that she is healed. The woman had grown accustomed to her

ailment. Eighteen years is a long time to be walking about bent double. She had been facing the ground for a long time and the effort for her to twist her body to look up and see the way ahead must have been excruciating. And so she faced the ground and got used to it. She became resigned to her fate. She would continue to attend the synagogue just like anyone else, quietly accepting the way things were. But Jesus refused to accept that for her. We should be grateful for that. Do you know that we are inheritors of this woman's action of standing up straight and praising God? This was an

act of salvation. Everyone who experiences Christ is restored like the woman who stood up straight in a much more profound sense than the restoration of flesh and blood. This restoration, changing her life forever, would reach way beyond the woman's days on earth. But we must not accept our slavery to the corrupting nature of this world the way the woman did. We must be open to God's healing so that we can move under the rule of Christ and experience his Kingdom. If we are open to that wonderful love, then it may save us a lot of pain and heartache. The woman's eighteen years of pain and

exclusion were no small thing and so likewise for all of humanity across the generations.

Hubert Humphrey was a former vice-president of the United States. When he died hundreds of people from across the world attended his funeral. All were welcome, but one – former President Richard Nixon, who had not long previously dragged himself and his country through the humiliation and shame of Watergate. As eyes turned away and conversations ran dry around him Nixon could feel the ostracism being ladled out to him.

Then Jimmy Carter, the serving US President, walked into the room. Carter was from a different political party to Nixon and well known for his honesty and integrity. As he moved to his seat President Carter noticed Richard Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Richard Nixon, held out his hand, smiling genuinely and broadly, embraced Nixon and said “Welcome home, Mr President! Welcome home!”

The incident was reported by Newsweek magazine, which wrote: “If there was a turning point in Nixon’s long ordeal in the

wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion.”⁵ The love and compassion of Jesus will not allow us to remain outcasts forever. We may not always help ourselves, in fact there will be times when we actively damage ourselves, but we know that the words of Jesus will come; “you are set free from your ailment”.⁶

⁵ Dunnan, M. 1994 *The Workbook of Living as a Christian* Abingdon Press pp. 112-113

⁶ Luke 13:12 NRSV