

The Divine Therapist

(Luke 13.10-17)

Grant Bullen

The Woman

If you close your eyes and switch on your imagination, you can *see* the woman enter the synagogue that day. At first glance she looks ancient, but when she comes closer you see she's actually not that old... But that body of hers... is carrying some impossibly heavy burden. Misery and pain bend her double... like a tree at breaking-point in a storm. Literally, she cannot stand up straight... so she shuffles, unable to lift her head. She says nothing... quite unable to look into the eyes of another person... imprisoned in her impairment. It's terrible to see.

Jesus doesn't mince words – he calls it *bondage*! And it's been so many years¹... you could say '*all her life*'. But is this *bent* torment really *life*? Does it deserve the name?

Intractable Suffering

Studying *Social Work* 30 years ago, gave me professional access to the wealth of contemporary knowledge about human dysfunction. The study was *supposed* to train me in the relief and healing of emotional and psychological pain... but it actually made me feel impotent and depressed. It taught me the intractability of all this 'stuff', this 'madness' that assails us. In the years I worked as a counsellor, I marvelled at the myriad ways the mind goes awry and how powerful dysfunction is. Most of the time I felt quite powerless to help.

Of course I already knew that from being a parish priest. There was the decade working with street people at St Mary Magdalene's (so much madness)... but also in ordinary parishes like ours. Good people, lovely people... but the damage within can be frightening. So much pain... so many 'bent-over' lives.

¹ Eighteen years says the text.

Where does it come from? Psychology tells us the damage is done in our early childhood... The wounds happen very early and then repeat through our lives... For some, time brings healing or at least improvement... but often the problem worsens and threatens to swallow us whole. Some people are completely taken over by it and their lives become a public tragedy. Most of us, however, manage to contain it... to hide our 'bent-over' selves away and live lives that are at least socially acceptable. But all of us live at a level well below the freedom and happiness we desire... and well below the beauty of humanity God created us for.

So there will be some of us here today, who know what it is to be the *crippled woman* of today's gospel... carrying a heavy interior burden... always struggling under sadness and anxiety. Sometimes the pain is so great, for all our coping mechanisms, we feel we can't stand up under it.

So... one simple question for today's sermon... '*Can God heal us?*'

In today's Gospel it's all so simple... Jesus tells the woman she's free... touches her... and she's instantly cured! Some believe such miracles of physical healing are still available to us... but alas I'm no help to you there, for that's foreign to my experience. And my interest is not about instantaneous miracles... but about whether God can heal the emotional and psychological damage we carry. Can God heal us *deep* inside... or is *this* just the way it always will be? Can God heal us... or is a bit of comfort the best we can hope for?

God Can Heal Us

The Christian faith is emphatic in its answer. ***Yes, God can heal our bent-over lives!*** It's not just *within* God's power to do so, but it is His passionate desire. God **wants** to heal us!

All the healing promises made in Scripture are available to us here and now. Week after week they call to us... From Isaiah (58.11) this morning, the prophet says that,

'God will rebuild our foundations from the rubble of our old lives.'

*We'll be like a well-watered garden,
like a gurgling spring that never runs dry.'*

Beautiful... but even better to my ageing ears is the Psalm (103.5) promising that

*'God will renew my youth...
make me soar like a young eagle.'*

or as Eugene Peterson translates it, *'We're always young in God's presence.'*

We're not supposed to struggle along under the weight of *bent-over* lives. God wants to heal us!

Trappist monk and spiritual guide, Thomas Keating, calls God *'the Divine Therapist'*... I like the idea... it's fun. But behind the playful metaphor lies serious and challenging teaching. He says that our wounds lie so deep within our past, so buried underneath years of denial and suppression, that true healing *can* only ultimately come from God. To be free from our 'bondage' requires a radical openness to the Spirit's work. Keating says that in the practice of silent prayer – what we now call meditation² – the protective layers are peeled-off and the light of Christ can bathe our wounds and restore our created wholeness. Which *sounds* beautiful... but listen carefully to the process he's describing...

*"In the deep rest of contemplative prayer
the human body receives permission, so to speak,
to evacuate the emotional junk of a lifetime.
In other words, we have a psychological tummy
filled with emotional traumas.
We are like persons sitting for ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years
on a meal we never digested....
What we need to heal our psychological indigestion
is a thorough evacuation of the emotional trauma itself.
That requires a willingness to feel the primitive emotions
of grief, fear, panic, despair,
or whatever emotions accompanied
the traumatic events of early life.
In the purification of the unconscious*

² But the tradition calls *contemplation*.

*this healing takes place through the process
of contemplative prayer.
Contemplative prayer gradually brings about
the liberation of whatever prevents the presence of God
from becoming a part of our conscious awareness.”*

Thomas Keating *“The Better Part”*

This is depth work... no quick adjustment or 3 week course in self-improvement. He’s describing a healing path that includes painful revisiting of old wounds... a radical ‘unmaking’ of the past so that we can be freed from whatever it is that makes us *bent-over*. It has all the resonances of Isaiah... *‘God will rebuild our foundations from the rubble of our old lives.’*

And we hear the same resonances in Hebrews (12.26-7) (Again I’m indebted to the translation of Eugene Peterson.) Paul says,

‘God’s voice is calling... “I’m going to shake you (and all creation) one last time... from top to bottom, stem to stern...” By this God means, a thorough housecleaning, getting rid of all the historical junk so that the unshakeable essentials stand clear and uncluttered.’

That’s deep healing! In fact Paul goes on to say,

“God’s actively cleaning house, torching all that needs to burn, and he won’t stop until it’s all cleansed. For indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

Conclusion

Jesus says to the ‘bent-over’ woman, *‘Woman be free!’* and then he touches her... What wounds does Christ touch deep inside that woman enabling her to be able to stand-up straight once more?

What would Christ need to touch deep within us, in order that we could stand straight and free once again... rejoicing in God’s presence saying, *‘Thank you! This is truly a life worth living.’*