

St Edmundsbury Cathedral
29 August 2019
Sermon Preached by the Revd Marianne Atkinson
TRINITY X

The crowd rejoiced at the wonderful things Jesus was doing. When there's a healing, a releasing, a setting free, it's natural to feel a lift, a delight, particularly if the event was not thought possible. Do you remember when those eleven youngsters were brought safely out of the remote and flooding cave in Thailand, and everyone rejoiced? And the woman in today's story burst out into thanksgiving in the release from her long-endured burden.

But one person in the scene was **not** pleased, - he who thought he knew what should or should not happen, according to the same rules by which he exercised authority. We could say he also was in a kind of bondage, which narrowed his view internally, as the woman's view had been limited externally. He gives the old Sabbath restriction priority over works of healing. Earlier in this Gospel Jesus says the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath, while, at a similar incident to today's, he asks if it is allowed to do good on the Sabbath or evil, to save a life or destroy it. So we could say that the disapproval of healing on the Sabbath is the sin against the Holy Spirit, an ultimate denial of the goodness of God.

In St. Paul's writing to the Romans there is much relating to the release brought by Christ to an enslaved, corrupted world. Memorably Paul says the whole Creation has groaned and travailed in pain until that time. And he admits that even he and his companions, having the first fruits of the Spirit, can still groan within themselves, in waiting for fulfilment.

What about the whole Creation now? We know far more of it than used to be known, and there are far more of us - six billion people on earth and rising. The work of creation still continues and the living world keeps changing, though it takes time to adapt. As you all know, there is a runaway change in physical climatic conditions, the acceleration brought about by human activity. Large numbers of species, plant and animal, in our interconnected living world cannot survive. How can we possibly now see a kingdom of wholeness and harmony on earth, even though some healings still happen?

I guess there are those among you who have experienced meetings where there has been a varied agenda to get through, with large matters and small, some short-term, some long-term. How often does so much time get spent on lesser, immediate items that the big, important ones have been shelved? There is often an elephant in the room. This surely happens with Governments too, with a reluctance to change

process, or risk unpopularity. My long-ago Bishop in Gloucester said "We're all in favour of change, so long as it doesn't make any difference".

Now and again prophetic voices command attention, the latest perhaps to show the urgency of the earth's plight being the young Scandinavian Greta Thunberg. Before her, with formidable documentation, was Sir David Attenborough. Also, notably circulated in 2015, was an Encyclical from Pope Francis. It's called 'Laudato Si', meaning 'Praise to you, my Lord', just as used in the 13th Century by St. Francis of Assisi. Pope Francis subtitled his long letter 'On Care for our Common home'. It's addressed to everyone, not just Roman Catholics, and it repays study, looking at the facts in detail, at human responsibility and the interconnectedness of all things.

He says that the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, and in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior, discovering the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things. Well, this has been understood by many poets. In the 19th Century Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

And of course blackberry bushes are among the least likely to fail to survive, though many of our most beautiful sights are threatened. Science and religion both work towards a better understanding; science looks at structure and development, religion at meaning and integration. But Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Neither in its impetus nor its achievements can science go to its limits without being tinged with mysticism and charged with faith".

Today's first reading from Isaiah speaks of restoration and wholeness. "You shall be like a watered garden". And there is a fuller view of the Sabbath, meant not only to be a time of rest, but of setting free, redeeming debts, freeing slaves, and allowing animals not to work, though still caring for them. The observance is corporate. The prophet said people should not serve their own interests or pursue their own affairs. And it has been said that selfish action always weakens society, while helpful interaction, especially if altruistic, always strengthens society.

That's any society. But we have been reminded in the second reading of the city of the living God in its righteousness and purity. It is made open to us through Christ, and our belonging with him is expressed in the sacraments. At the altar we

shall have again today that supreme ever-fresh gift, that combines ordinary materials from the world around us with the loving presence of the Lord, who comes to us. We are part of the world God loves and need to see it more clearly, thinking of those who will come after us. The mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote of God's coming 'in the little things' in a poem; it ends with God's words:

Till, by such art
I shall achieve My Immemorial Plan.
Pass the low lintel of the human heart.
Amen.

Marianne Atkinson