

Luke 13

When we read that Jesus was wandering around Israel, preaching the kingdom of God, I wonder what we imagine. Stuck in my head is the University “Christian Union” idea that – what the world really lacks, is information. The world is in a mess. Our economy is going up the wall. Our ecological future is bleak. Natural disasters abound. Sin is rife – worse today, than it has ever been before – Disease and Death stalk the globe like two great stalking things. So – in the midst of all this horror – what does the world need? It needs ... correct information.

And so in a few weeks time, across the country – posters will fill the university notice boards, be wrapped around university lamp-posts and blue tacked to the inside of university toilet doors, providing celestial information for students who lacked the correct information about life, the universe and everything. (At the end of term, some student unions will be having their three-yearly discussion about whether posters should be allowed on the inside of toilet doors in student accommodation. - that is how aggressively informative the Christian Unions can be. And I think, my favourite inside-a-toilet poster was the one that said, “my peace I give unto you, my peace I leave you...”

But generally, the posters were inviting students to come to talks where Jesus is explained, where information is provided, information about that great information service himself – God! Presenting these people with the gospel, meant nothing other than spelling out the basic facts of the Christian faith – which should be enough, in and of itself, for any sane, right thinking student, rosy of cheek and sound of mine, to become Christian.

And at these talks – we wouldn’t usually hear about Jesus. We would hear about Paul. Well, we’d about what the latest evangelical celebrity thought of Paul. And Jesus, if he ever did appear, served two purposes. Firstly, to present the Gospel to Israel – providing them with the correct information so that the people living in darkness would, see a great light and be freed from misinformation. And secondly, he would have to die to appease an angry God and be raised back to life to prove that his words were true.

Well, there are several problems here – the main one being that information about our plight is not enough, in and of itself, for us to do anything about it. I wonder what kind of a service it would be, to point to someone who’s fallen in a river and shout “your drowning”. – Oh – thank you! Or, more seriously, food addictions of various kinds. We find our government assuming that if the public are informed about the kind of food they are eating, if it is bad for them, they will eat less of it! Therefore, we will provide information about the food on the wrapper. That way, every time I want a bar of chocolate, I will see – hold on – this is full of chocolate, and refrain from having too much. Telling people that smoking seriously damages your health, is not going to break anyone’s addiction.

So, with our brightest students on the one hand – and those in government at the other – it seems widely assumed that the way to set people free and to bring them to a position of spiritual or physical health – what we need is ... Information. It is hardly surprising, that when we imagine Jesus wandering around Israel, preaching the Gospel – we imagine him simply disseminating correct information – a job that could be done by anyone.

But there was a little more to Jesus’ message than spouting religious truth at people. If this person was a prophet, then, as the travellers on the road to Emmaus recognised, he was a

prophet mighty in word AND deed. In fact, in Hebrew the word for “word” is the same word for “deed”. And when you think about it, Jesus doesn’t do very much preaching. After the beginning of his ministry, there don’t seem to be any more sermons. There are parables – for sure, but a parable is not a sermon.

The parables are usually used by Jesus to respond to people asking him to explain himself, AFTER he has done something! Or they are a means of answering questions that are brought to him – “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance between us...” Parables are not a means of spouting religious truths at people – they are designed to disturb listeners, not provide them with correct information. (That’s why parable interpretation is a minefield – because how many times are they taken and turned into sources of scientific and eternal truth by people who could hear in them nothing other than correct information.)

And the healings and the exorcisms and the challenges that Jesus makes, are simply acted parables. So the reading that we have this morning is an acted parable. One of the major pictures for the people of Israel in first century Palestine was being in bondage to satan. And this woman has been in bondage to satan for how many years... 18. I don’t like the numbers game, but as I wrote this morning – something about these numbers occurred. I hope you can humour me as I explain.

This woman has been in bondage for 18 years. How old is a Jewish boy when he becomes an adult? 12. And how old was Jesus when he began his ministry? 30. So ... this woman has been bound by satan throughout Jesus’ adult life. Now.... Stay with it. How long was the ministry of Jesus? 3 years! So... the 18 years of this woman’s affliction, as a proportion to the 3 years of Jesus’ ministry is what? 18:3 – which rounds down, if you divide it by 3, to 6:1. That is the proportion of Sabbath, is it not? And the dispute around this passage is a dispute about the Sabbath.

So ... the time that Jesus is preaching and teaching and announcing the kingdom of God, is itself – a Sabbath ministry – from the perspective of his own adult life, and from the perspective of this woman who has been afflicted by satan for 18 years. So ... when these people start making a fuss about Jesus healing her on the Sabbath – his response is essentially this: that his ministry is the True Sabbath – the Sabbath, after all, is the time of rest after trouble, as redemption after slavery. Jesus is the living, walking, breathing, healing embodiment of Sabbath celebration!

He is not just talking about it, providing information about the kingdom of God. He is showing that when the kingdom of God comes – now that the kingdom of God is breaking in, broken people are made whole, afflicted people are healed, troubled people find rest. Anyone who truly understood the scriptures they were quoting at Jesus because he was “working on the Sabbath”, had missed everything that Israel was, everything that Sabbath stood for and everything that Jesus was doing.

Jesus’ reply is not simply to say, hey, its ok to work on the Sabbath. It’s not even to say “Oh, Sabbath is about liberation, so it’s a fitting day to release this woman from satan.” Jesus is saying, with his actions more than anything else, that – here, and now, Sabbath is kept when we rejoice that the Kingdom of God is breaking – and that the healing of this woman is a deeper fulfilment of Sabbath than anything his opponents could even imagine.

The reason that they were humiliated, was not that Jesus had given them some clever argument. The only information he gave them, was an explanation of what he had already done. And what he had done was hold a powerful, public celebration of Sabbath.

Sabbath was not about how far you were allowed to walk or how much work you were allowed to do. It was about God breaking into your life to remake you at the core. Jesus had got right to the true heart of Sabbath – and everybody there knew it.

And if we were there – I wonder where we would be? Where do we see ourselves in the story?

With the woman, healed on the Sabbath – a miniature fulfilment of freedom in eternal dimensions. Freed from Satan after a life of slavery to who knows what?
Or maybe, we would see ourselves alongside Jesus – seeking by word and action, for the kingdom of God to break into our world and bring real freedom for real people.
Or maybe, we see ourselves with his opponents: Jesus is not doing things properly.

So – back to the toilet door version of Christianity.

The one that knows what Christian ministry is and woe be to any who fail to live up to it. (The Christian Union has special labels for these people.)

The one that believes all we need to do is provide people with the correct information about Christ and everything will be ok.

The one that excuses itself the hardship of actually presenting the Gospel to people, by bleating at them with mere words.

Toilet door versions of Christianity are like a blue print that clouds our vision of God, ourselves and the world – and as such, are part of the affliction that keeps us bound for 18 years. And maybe, the time has come for each of us to celebrate Sabbath properly.

To Sabbath is to stop – and to see and hear and feel God at work in our lives.

It is an act of sacrifice, so painful for those who have become attached to their religion, and habits, and careers and aspirations and goals and strategies and quests.

But Sabbath is the place to stop – and see God at work in our lives, remaking us, reshaping us, transforming us ever more into the people he created us to be.

Time for me to stop now, as we close our eyes and picture this woman – bound by Satan, afflicted for years. Picture her body. Picture her face. See in her, our reflection – socially, morally, physically, spiritually.

Today Is Sabbath

And hear now, the words of Jesus: “Why should this woman, a daughter of Abraham, who Satan has kept bound for 18 long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

