

Sunday between 21st and 27th August [21]

Luke 13:10-17

If you were to look up what clergy are meant to do to fulfil their obligations you would find that the expectation is that primarily they pray, celebrate the Eucharist and preach the gospel. Sometimes we take that part of preaching a bit literally and think that means we should only preach about the words heard from the gospel reading, that is, the final reading we hear each week taken from one of the 4 books of the bible known as the gospels. But in fact gospel means good news, and preaching the gospel means preaching the good news we have come to know. It was worth just clarifying that as our readings this morning on the face of it seem to be a bit disconnected. The reading from Jeremiah, the psalm and even the portion we heard from the letter to Hebrews, all give a sense of being a part of God's family from forever. They all suggest that it is no accident that we are people of faith, that we have been called and that we have heeded that call. Then we have the gospel reading, which is a little different at first glance.

Now the gospel reading is about healing on the Sabbath and that looks like a whole other issue. It might feel like a struggle to work out what a miraculous healing done on the Sabbath causing people to tut at Jesus has to do with our being known by God from of old, before even our birth. But with careful reading it can be found in verse 16 which quotes Jesus as saying "Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for 18 years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

Do you hear what Jesus calls this lady, a daughter of Abraham? Everyone hearing these words would have been quite aware that the nation of Israel, the Hebrew people were a family descended from one man, Abraham, the father of a nation. So, by referring to the woman who was healed as a daughter of Abraham Jesus was marking her out as a chosen child of God, a partaker in the covenant of Israel, one of God's own, chosen and called. But what does it mean to us today? We are not, so far as we are aware, necessarily direct descendants of Abraham, and yet we hear the word of God to Jeremiah, "I have known you since you were in the womb", and we recognise that feeling. Our relationship with God as a Christian is one where we are known fully and completely by God. But how do we claim that, what gives us permission to claim this status of child of God. We know about the covenant with Abraham, but what about us?

Well for us, it is all about Jesus. In today's reading we hear of his ministry to one of the Hebrew women and his reminder to those who would criticise his actions that even by their limited knowledge of the love of God this woman should be treated with honour as a daughter of Abraham. But for Jesus, God's love doesn't stop there. His ministry, his teaching and his parting commission to the disciples makes it increasingly clear that God's love is shown to all who come in faith to receive it, by grace alone we are acceptable, no matter who we find when we go digging back through history and look through the family tree. Jesus' great commission, his final words at the ascension were directed towards the apostles and commanded that they baptise all nations in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

By baptism we are each publicly recognised as being members of the body of Christ. It is a ceremony of initiation and opens the way for further commitment, 1st Communion, confirmation, active membership at all levels of church life, it all starts with baptism. But it is far more than that, baptism is moment in time when we acknowledge our connection with God. That is what occurs at a baptism, it is publicly acknowledged that by grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit we have recognised God's love for this person and the truth of their calling is unchanged, but through the ritual act we all get to give thanks for it.

It was no different for us than it was for Jeremiah, we were each known and loved by God even as we were formed in our mothers' wombs. We are all children of God by baptism, if not by descent from Abraham, and as such we should all hear the words of Jesus in today's

gospel and allow God to set us free from those things which bind us, old hurts, emotional baggage, worry, pain, despair, fear, guilt. Jesus is offering healing to all who are his, and we are his, called into relationship with our heavenly father, a relationship witnessed by our family and community at our baptism.

Now if that's not good news then what is! This is the message that we hear preached over and over again, with different words and using different texts, but the good news is unchanged. We are loved and chosen by God, it's not something we do, we are not responsible for it, we can't claim the credit, neither can we be too far from God to be called back. God said, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" God said this to Jeremiah but is no less true for us. That is the gospel we preach, that is the good news we proclaim. Forget the privilege of being Abraham's child and begin to understand what it is to be a child of God.

Let us end with a helpful saying that despite reasonable but unsuccessful attempts to find the original it stays anonymous, but it reads, "On the darkest days when I feel inadequate, unloved and unworthy, I remember whose child I am and I straighten my Crown!"

Isn't that true for us all, as children of God, the almighty, we need never feel inadequate, unworthy or unloved, if we are enough for God then we are enough. That's the sort of good news we could hear more of! To God be the glory.