

August 22nd 2010
The Twelfth after Trinity
Rules
Isaiah 58. 9b-14; Hebrews 12. 18 -29; Luke 13. 10-17



I don't know about you but I am always inventing new rules in my life - my latest one is don't go on Facebook until the sermon is written; or don't fill up the washing machine until the ironing is finished which is fine until the clothes run out! At the BBQ on Friday the rule finally was "Don't put your raffle ticket back just because you don't want the prize!" Perhaps wherever you have a gathering of people there are rules - what do we have in St James? Is it

"Don't sit at the front on the church on the right hand side as it is too near the piano." What rules do you think we have in here?

Suggestions - "stay awake!"

Order when going up to communion.

Jesus broke practically every rule in the book in the Gospel we heard today when he healed the woman in the synagogue. That he did this was entirely of his own making - as can be seen from the fact that *he* approached the woman, she did not approach him. It is interesting to note when Jesus is the one who makes the first approach to heal someone who is sick. Anyway, today, he approaches the poor woman who is described as "being crippled by a spirit for eighteen years" and as a consequence was completely bent over, forced, we imagine, to look mostly at the ground.

The obvious rule that Jesus broke is that he healed on a Sunday. Jesus, not for the first time, has shows scant regard for the Sabbath law although the ruler of the synagogue seems to have turned on the public rather than Jesus

- "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." There was much discussion in Jesus time as to what constituted breaking the law of the Sabbath and although violation of the Sabbath was, according to Exodus 31.15 punishable by death, it is unlikely that such a punishment was carried out in Jesus time. The adherence to this law was already changing. Jesus *thoroughly engaged* with the process of that change saying "The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2. 27) and challenging "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3.4)

But it was not only that taboo of not doing work on the Sabbath that Jesus challenged. *He called the woman forward* in the synagogue to stand in the midst of the worshippers; the norm was for the women to sit at the back and remain quiet during the active parts of the worship. To me this action is a way of saying that this woman, who the rules say is untouchable because she is both a woman and sick, is central to your worship of God. The Sabbath which is made special by separation is made special by the healing and giving of freedom to this woman. In addition, Jesus makes it clear that he does not believe it is the sins of the woman or her family that have caused her illness -" this woman...whom Satan has kept bound." Jesus is issuing a multi faceted challenge to the regulations of the faith he was nurtured in.

Why would Jesus do this? Two chapters earlier Jesus has been furious with the keepers of the law, not, I think, with the law itself. The Jewish law had developed for good reasons; it held in control the powerful; the rights of the weaker could be protected and justice could be seen to be held in high esteem. The law gave the means for the key of knowledge to be given to the poorest person who could not carry out wealth shrinking sacrificial offerings at the temple in Jerusalem. Yet in Chapter 11 sees Jesus issuing a series of moral shrinking "woes" to the Pharisees, the keepers of the law:

"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs but you neglect justice and the love of God."

"Woe to you because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry..."

"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key of knowledge..."

The law was being used for purposes entirely contradictory to their original intention. Jesus saw their instigation as the antithesis of the stricture in

Michah 6. 8 " to act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Walking humbly with God; I love that picture. Now that's what I think we are about when we come to worship. In worshipping we are acknowledging that we are always accompanied by God and that God, both with us and ahead of us and behind us, is beyond our understanding or confining. As I listened to the reading from Hebrews I today had a picture of where we have come to worship. Not to a fiery, frightening mountain; not to a place where the blood of the jealous brother is sprinkled but where the blood of Jesus, of love is and where we can learn to "live in peace and be holy." (Hebrews 12. 14b)

That humble walk is so different from negotiating a myriad of rules. "The Lord will guide you always, he will satisfy your needs in a sun scorched land and will strengthen your frame." This is a wonderful picture from Isaiah as he goes on to describe how we can find the Sabbath a delight. "spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry....satisfy the needs of the oppressed..." This is the picture of the Sabbath that, no doubt, Jesus valued and longed to return to.

You know when I keep my rule about the washing I can kid myself that I am doing the washing when I am not. I'm following the rule of no washing until the ironing is done but I am doing neither the ironing or the washing. Washing isn't all that important but what if I am doing this in the rest of my life. What if I am doing all the things I think God wants me to do but neglecting the core of his message? What if I have pictures of Jesus all over the house to show that I love him, read the Bible, pray and go to church regularly but I forget all about the poor, the powerless. That must mean I am out of touch with God. It must mean that following the rules and regulations is not doing me any good. Because I don't think you can be in touch with God and fail to catch his care for others and indeed his care for ourselves. Worship is important but not because of any obligation. It is important because of that walk, that humble walk with God; that being touched by God so that we become more like God. That catching of Christ's fury with injustice so that we care enough to put ourselves out and fight for what is right.

Jesus did it when he saw it; Jesus did it when he was out and about; Jesus just got on with it- he reached out his hand. We are being called simply to do the same, to react with love and bring healing when we can, in the twists and turns of our daily lives. Or we can put aside special "justice" time. A long time ago , when my children were little, I used to write for Amnesty International. You are given clear instructions as to what to write and who to send the letters and postcards too but I was never sure that what I did made any difference. Do you remember the wonderful summer story we had of the Russian Spies being returned to Russia earlier in August, in exchange for so called western spies? I was really moved to hear how a Russian scientist who had been jailed in Russia until his August release, kept with him all the postcards that had been sent by Amnesty International people. Those brief messages had been a life line.

We don't always know what we do but everything we do has an impact somewhere so let us make sure that we are working for the great disturber Jesus Christ, whose love in action, has at its core not sentimentality but a passion for justice and mercy. Amen.