

“Set free on the Sabbath Day”

This week we were greatly saddened with the passing of Dr. Robbie Robertson, a much-loved doctor for 32 years in Springburn and elder in a church in Springburn, and in later years, member here of this congregation.

Robbie had also been a police surgeon, and also looked after a long term psychiatric ward in Woodilee Hospital. But one of his jobs that he really loved, and he shared this with me on several occasions, was when he became a GP trainer, and then he focussed on undergraduate teaching and became a senior lecturer at Glasgow University, where he designed and delivered a communication skills course to undergraduate medical students.

When Robbie spoke to me about this, his eyes lit up, and he told me on several occasions that he loved this role. He said to me, it's so important to have our doctors trained, to have the right manner and presence with their patients and Dr. Robertson certainly was the right man to teach this discipline, and no doubt he influenced many doctors over this period of his life. Why, was he so keen for me to know this? I believe that he saw this work as being pastoral work. He saw this as being part of his Christian faith. For this is the work that Jesus was involved in.

The Gospel of St. Luke was written by a medical doctor called Luke. This we know from Colossians 1v14, when Paul finishes his letter and says to his people, “Luke our dear doctor sends you his greetings.” Luke researched the main characters of the early church, to draw up his wonderful story of Jesus and the early church in the Book of Acts. What we have is Luke's eye witness account of Jesus and His church.

Being a medical practitioner, Dr Luke in his Gospel is fascinated with healing. I would imagine, that if Jesus were healing today, those called to practice medicine would also watch him with fascination.

Dr. Luke pays particular interest in the ways that Jesus heals people.

In our story today, of the healing of the crippled lady, Jesus begins his healing with the words...“*Woman you are set free from your infirmity!*” or as Eugene Peterson translates in the Message, “*Woman, you're free!*”

The power of words to heal or hurt, to bless or curse is incredible.

Words that we use when we speak to people can be so powerful, especially when they come from the lips of Jesus.

Jesus after all was the Word made flesh. He is the Word of God for the world and Dr. Luke pays careful attention to Jesus words and teachings. They were words of someone who was a healer.

Jesus healed with words.

There are stories in Luke's Gospel that we do not hear in the other Gospels and they have to do with healing. The Good Samaritan is a story of healing, not just the physical wounds of the Jewish man, who fell into the hands of robbers, but the healing hands of the Samaritan who held him, put him on his donkey and whose hands went into his pocket to pay for the wounded man's restoration to health.

But in this parable, there are deeper motifs of healing, for this was a parable to show that healing can happen between enemies; between Jews and Samaritans; and so Luke treasures this parable as it comes from the lips of Jesus and it has brought healing through the centuries.

Then there is the parable of the Prodigal Son; a Son who breaks the family chain; a son who goes into a dark place, and finds himself in the gutter with no friends; a Son who comes to his senses and in doing so, is met with the love and grace of his Father. Another story of healing and that healing of soul, spirit, mind and body is for everyone, even the prodigal.

But Dr. Luke has little gems of stories, where Jesus is found healing someone in need.

The woman in our passage today is nameless, it looks like this is Jesus' first encounter with her. He simply calls her, "Woman", but notice that by the end of the encounter, he has given her a new name, "daughter of Abraham". For he sees in this woman, something remarkable, he sees faith. Abraham, of course was the father of faith of the Jewish nation; he was the one who heard God's voice, "Leave everything behind and go to a place that I have prepared for you." He obeyed the Word of God and he left everything – not knowing where he was going, but trusting in the Word that he received from God.

Jesus recognises that in this woman is the faith of Abraham. Someone who hears God's word, and is willing to obey the word through faith in Jesus.

This story focusses on the faith of a special woman. A woman, who in the eyes of the world, would have been basically discarded. Her disability crippled her life. She was trapped in her medical condition. She had been like this for eighteen years, and life was certainly no fun for her. Luke spoke

often about women in his Gospel, forty-two times in fact, he describes Jesus' encounters with women, more than any other Gospel writer. He was amazed at how Jesus would reach out to women with compassion.

Dr. Luke describes her medical condition, as someone “who was bent over and could not straighten up”. A woman in her generation would have had little support, if any. She was an outsider in this synagogue, women were in those days. Women were not counted when it came to worship, since only men counted for a quorum in the formal service. Women were usually left at home, left to do the housework. But this woman was incapable, and she found her place in the corner of the synagogue.

Why was she there?

Well, I would think she found comfort being in God's house. Who knows, maybe she had no other house. She was a woman of faith, who trusted that God has his eye on his sparrow and if he has his eye on the sparrow, he has his eye on me.

This was her moment, her encounter with God, when Jesus called her over.

I believe that we all get moments to encounter God. But it takes the eye of faith to recognise it. He often calls us to himself. It may well have been a long time since someone called her over, a long-time of sitting in the shadows, waiting for her moment, waiting for God to speak.

Like Anna and Simeon in the Temple, when Jesus was a baby and his parents took him to be circumcised. Luke 2 v³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^[e] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna may have been in the Temple 60 years, believing that one day, God would speak to her, and that day he did. She waited for God and he arrived in the form of a baby.

When we come to church, are we listening for God? Are we waiting for him to speak into our lives?

This is an important part of our Christian faith, listening, waiting, expecting God to turn up and speak to us.

That day in the synagogue the woman who had been crippled found her freedom. Her freedom came through the words of Jesus, *Be free...*

But Dr. Luke also highlights that it came through his touch. Dr. Luke noticed that Jesus' hands touched the woman. He laid his hands on her and immediately she straightened up. Dr. Luke loves to notice immediate healings. "He placed his hands on her". Healing comes through words but it also comes through touch, Jesus was a man of integrity, his words and his actions were congruent.

When Jesus healed, it was complete and we are told, "at once she straightened herself up and praised God".

I love this line. Her immediate response is to straighten herself and to praise God.

I recall another instance when a crooked man also found freedom with Jesus' words and touch and that was Zacchaeus - Luke 19, and only Dr. Luke picks up on this story, after Zachaeus' dinner party for Jesus, he announced to everyone, that he was giving away all his money and that he was paying back everyone four times the money that he stole from them. How does Luke describe this moment? "He stood up", he literally straightened himself, he became an honest man, he was freed from his guilt and shame, he did the honest thing.

The words and touch of Jesus change lives.

This should have been a cause for immediate rejoicing, except for one fact. It was the Sabbath.

This leads us to our final point.

There is another layer to this story and that is about religion which has died. It's a sad thing to see a church dying. But it happens. When I ministered 20 years ago in Balornock and Barmulloch, I would speak often to people, who would tell me of the many churches that there used to be in Springburn and in fact, even here in Bishopbriggs, I speak to those today, who have memories of the church that they were brought up in and is no longer there.

It is a sad thing to see a church that is coming to the end of its life. It happens. It is happening today all over Scotland, Churches grow old and the life of the church evaporates.

That's what happened in Jesus' day. The spiritual life of the Jewish church in Jesus' time was at a low ebb. There was little vitality. Yes, they were good at

maintaining the rules and the regulations and the institution, but they had forgotten one essential truth, one law which should have been the foundation of their church, and that was to “Love God with all their heart, soul and mind, love their neighbour as themselves.” Those two laws cannot be split. They are two sides of the same coin. They belong together.

They had become people more concerned with preserving the past, looking after their traditions, protecting their law and boundaries, so that they had forgotten the needs of those in their community. Obeying the law had become more important than healing someone.

Their church existed for themselves, and so it was gradually and slowly disappearing.

The crippled woman in our story could easily be a metaphor for the church of Jesus' day. It was bent over, it had lost God's spirit.

But God steps in to save His church. He sends his Son as Saviour, to become the one who brings healing and renewal, and to again refocus His church on its true mission.

It's no accident that this healing happens in the Synagogue, the very place where Jewish law was upheld. Jesus encounters the leader of the synagogue, who tells Jesus, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

But Jesus challenges this assumption, when he speaks of their practices of caring for their animals on the Sabbath, more than the needs of a human being like this woman.

Of course, the Sabbath was important to Jesus, but more important was that the mercy and the love of God was given freely to those in need.

Dr. Luke pays special attention to all those in the margins of life for that was where Jesus practiced his ministry with the elderly, with the infirm, with the weak and the ostracised, and the hopeless and the abandoned. There you would find Jesus, and Luke points this out time and time again.

Dr. Luke's purpose in writing his Gospel, is summed up in chapter 1 v4, “I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything that you have been taught.” He is a man of great learning, a man of detail, who wants to present

the authentic Jesus. He wants to show how Jesus changed lives and Luke's Gospel speaks to us today, as it spoke to the first readers and hearers back in the year AD 70.

So, what does this story say to us?

Yes, illness can be one, but there are also other issues, gambling, debt, addiction, poverty, grief and the list goes on – each and every one, an evil in itself. Yes, those powers can cripple the strongest and can leave people feeling, guilty, downcast and bent over. Many people like this struggling woman dream of that day of freedom, of being set free. They dream of the day that someone, something, will step into their lives and give them freedom.

Now we may not be trapped by large issues such as those mentioned; but in life, there will be things that we would love to change and to get help with. Things which drag us down. The psalmists were often in situations like this, and often cried out for freedom, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove; then I would fly away and rest!” psalm 55 v6

How many people have felt like this over the years, to want the ability to escape from our problems. But the psalmist then goes on to tell us the secret of how we can cope, psalm 55v 22, “Cast your burdens on the Lord and he will sustain you.”

I started with Dr. Robbie Robertson, let me finish with a few words about him. As I said he was a man of faith. I remember him after the morning services in this church, meeting me at the door on the way out, and that was pre-covid times, when people could embrace each other , just a little bit more than today.

On his way out of church, Dr Robbie would grasp my hand and give me a strong handshake and look straight into my eyes and say with all sincerity, thank you, thank you, and I could feel his sincerity as he communicated his message to me. As a minister and a preacher, that moment of encounter lifts one's spirit, because I knew that he had been touched by Jesus.

My friends, allow Jesus to speak into your lives, be open to his word, and his touch, through those who pass through your life, and be encouraged and built up in your faith, and like the lady in the story, go on your way praising God.