

Sermon: 2019/08/25 (11th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - *Jeremiah 1:4-10 & Luke 13:10-17_BTR*

[Invite children to the front. Knitting needles and some yarn.]

The words we just heard from Jeremiah are some of the most beloved and famous in the *whole* of the Bible: ““Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...”

I think, almost certainly, that Jeremiah, a faithful *Jewish* ‘boy’, a boy who probably knew the Holy Scriptures, would have heard those words - which are God’s words - and found himself thinking about what, centuries earlier, King David wrote in the *Psalms*, about being “knit together in my mother’s womb.” [Psalm 139:13.]

And he - David - was himself most probably thinking about the prophet Job’s words from even earlier still that God ‘knit me together with bones and sinews.’ [10:11]

And I love that idea, of God, like a smiling, kindly old grandma, knitting people together. [Pretend to knit.]

Now, the passage from *Jeremiah* is about the first time that he heard the Lord’s voice, telling him to go and warn the king that the Babylonians were coming to destroy the kingdom.

But I want us to focus on an underlying truth that emerges here about the sanctity of human life.

What does that mean?

“Sanctity”?

[Special. Precious. Important to God.]

Right!

Human life matters to God

It matters to God *without* qualification, *in spite* of appearances.

We might bully and be mean to others because they look funny or look different, or can’t do the things that we’re good at.

We might not treat them well because they are small or weak, or are in their mother’s bellies.

But God cares about every single one of us, *even* before we are born.

Even if we cannot talk or play sports or see, or any of that “stuff.”

Each one of us matters just the same in His eyes from the moment we are

“conceived” - that means, “begin to exist,” and we need to keep that *always* in mind in *all* of our actions toward others.

Let us pray: ...

[Dismiss children.]

The episode from Jesus’ ministry that Luke brings us this morning takes place *entirely* within a synagogue.

And in regard to what happens, the synagogue, then, serves almost like the stage in a theater.

And the building, actually, wouldn’t have been much bigger than that; than a “stage.”

They tended to be quite small, you see, with limited seating - on hard wooden benches - for about one hundred or so people.

About the size of this sanctuary, in fact.

The synagogue would have been made of mudbrick, probably.

Flat-roofed.

With, maybe, twelve windows in the walls; one for each of the twelve tribes of the Hebrews.

And on one side of the exterior; the front, it would have had a gleaming white limestone or marble facade, with two simple columns flanking the doorway.

Now, if you want to know what a typical synagogue looked like in that century - during the so-called “Second Temple” period, there’s a purpose-built Masonic Lodge in Murfreesboro, which is, to my mind, a very good approximation.

I noticed it just the other day:

It’s on the corner of South-East Broad Street and Middle Tennessee Boulevard - where those roads intersect; just beyond the Sonic and before the Rutherford Farmers’ Co-op.

Look out for it when you’re near there: [n.1].

And, if you do see it, picture it at the centre of a 1st century Palestinian village, which is where you would find it - at the highest point in the community: its *focal* point.

Hills of wheat in the background.

Goats and children everywhere.

Synagogues were oblong-shaped; built, roughly, on a north-south axis.

And, at one end - the end facing Mt Zion, opposite to the entrance, was, not an altar or Communion Table, *obviously(!)*, but an aedicule or an alcove in which, behind a *richly* embroidered curtain - mimicking the arrangement of the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle in Moses’ day, the sacred papyri were kept - the books that we would call, the “Old Testament.” [n.2]

And whenever and wherever, in the gospels, a synagogue is mentioned, you can be *absolutely* certain that the events taking place are in Galilee; in the north; *not* in Jerusalem where the Temple was, or Judea.

Why?

Because there was some tension between the priesthood in the capital city, and their desire to monopolise Judaism and profit from doing so, and what the synagogues represented - which was a more democratic, egalitarian, Scripture based approach to the religion.

"Scripture-based" as opposed to sacrificial-cult-based.

Yes, of course, it was not necessarily an "either-or."

Most Jewish people - just like Jesus, built their lives around trips to both.

But the priests - the "Sadducees" - didn't run the synagogues, and looked down on them.

Like those chapels you see deep in the woods, they were for "zealots."

That's with a small "z(ee)," by the way.

I'm not referring to the terrorist group that was contemporaneous with Christ, but about enthusiasts.

Simple, pious folk.

The devout.

People whose faith in God was just *too* alive; too personal and real to be restricted to occasional, *expensive* pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover or other feasts, which is why we find the Savior in them *sooo(!)* much:

This is where - in the synagogue - he was going to find men and women eager to listen.

Men and women seeking to *know* the Lord, to have a *relationship* with Him.

Just like today, there were Jews for whom being "religious" was just for "show;" about keeping up appearances.

But the synagogue was for those in the provinces - in the "back country" - who were genuine; *sincere*.

And so, one day, He was sitting there in one, enjoying a cool, dark respite from the blazing Middle Eastern sunshine, and in walks a woman who was 'crippled': [Lk. 13:10-11].

'[B]ent over and..quite unable to stand up straight'.

And had been stuck like that for 18 years.

Imagine that.

Imagine spending almost *two*, whole decades staring at the floor; at feet; at animal manure and sewage.

Imagine how desperate you would feel.

To see the stars.

To kiss someone, looking in their eye.

Your heart should *break* hearing about her condition.

Rebekah and I knew someone - a lady - in Yorkshire who was exactly like this. She had to use her own hands to lift her face up to speak to you. It was awful!

And so, seeing this 'woman', Jesus goes ahead and performs a miracle.

A miracle of freeing her from what He calls a 'bondage'.

And anytime Jesus does something like that it proves two things - and you've heard me say this before:

One, it "proves" that He was God.

Doctors can't lay hands on you and do this.

It takes drugs and clever technology and physiotherapists, etcetera, etcetera.

But Jesus *bends* nature to His will.

And the only one who could do such a thing must be, therefore, the one who created it - that is, "nature" - in the first place.

Two, He proves that God, by default, loves us.

Loves humanity.

That He is a philanthropist.

And this is *such* good news.

This is the good news that *loads* of people need to hear.

People that we know.

People who are faced with sickness and problems - they *need* to hear that God wants something better for them.

But there is something else that I'd like to "pull out" from the passage.

I think that this incident neatly illustrates a *profound* theological truth that we might miss.

And that's this:

Notice how Jesus pronounced that that 'crippled' woman was healed, *before* she was *actually* healed.

Look again if you need to.

He calls out to her that she is healed as she enters the synagogue.

Just like that.

But, in fact, she only experiences it when she reaches Him where He is, and He touches her.

This means there was a gap - a "gap" of time between the pronouncement of her freedom from ill health, and then the *reality* of it.

A gap of what must have been excruciating, tortuous seconds where she almost certainly wondered: "Is He *mad*?" "Is this too good to be true?"

And *we* - we live in *that* moment as she shuffled across the open space in the synagogue toward the Savior.

We have heard - from the Bible - amazing things that are supposedly true for us if we claim them by confession:

that death is beaten.

That sin is beaten.

That suffering and grief are "on notice."

Going "out-of-style."

And we might think as she probably thought!

Faith, however, is to keep. On. Walking, forward. Hoping for the best.

Trusting that we *will* find Him waiting to fulfil His word (to us), eventually.

Footnotes:

1. 'Masonic Hall' - <https://www.google.com/maps/place/35.829051,+86.381182/@35.8285855,-86.3813266,17z>
2. For my description of synagogues in Jesus' day, see: Hachlili, Rachel (2003), 'Jewish Art and Iconography in the Land of Israel', in Richard, Suzanne (Ed.), *Near Eastern Archaeology: A Reader*, Winona Lake, I. N.: Eisenbrauns, pp. 445-454, 446-449. And the following essay by Steven Fine, 'Synagogues in the Land of Israel, pp. 455-464. ALSO: Turner, Harold W. (1979), *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship*, The Hague, Netherlands; Paris; New York, N. Y.: Mouton Publishers, 281-283.