

**Trinity 10 2022**

**Luke 13:10-17**

Over the years people have often asked me if I'm religious. Now that I am a Vicar, they are more likely to say, "I'm not religious like you". Another favourite is, "I am not religious, but I am spiritual". Sometimes I have said that I am not religious, I am a Christian. Although, in fact the word religious simply means, relating to or believing in a religion. And so, if Christianity is a religion, then I am religious. We have made it so much more than simply being people of faith though haven't we. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having particular ways to worship. One of the ways that Jesus worshipped God as a practising Jew, was to attend the synagogue wherever He was. He not only took an active part in the worship, but he would stand up and teach from the scriptures. But then He would often say or do something that would upset or offend the hierarchy and there would be trouble. On this occasion he healed a woman who was bent over and unable to stand up straight. And the leader of the synagogue was not happy to say the least. According to their rules and customs they believed that it was wrong to heal someone on the Sabbath. Of course, there may well have been some jealousy involved here – after all the leaders of the synagogues were important people in the community. They were used to people looking up to them and paying attention to them. And then along comes this itinerant Galilean rabbi not only breaking the rules but also drawing attention to Himself and away from them.

So often though, we are told that what results from Jesus's actions is that the person who has been touched by Jesus in some way, healed or forgiven, immediately starts praising God. And that is exactly what happens here – the woman immediately starts praising God. The Bible tells us that we are made to be in relationship with God. St Augustine famously said, "For you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

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Just as Jesus said that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the sabbath we need to understand that the rituals and the rules that we have devised for ourselves only have any worth if they result in our worshipping God. As long as our forms of worship help us into heartfelt praise of the living God, then that is fine. And who are we to look at how others worship God and criticise them? It is part of our sinful nature that we like to compare ourselves to others and secretly, or not so secretly think that the way we do things is better. Happy Clappy is a term of derision. At the same time, people who some would dismissively call Happy Clappy will be convinced that a Service like this is just meaningless repetition. There is a church called Hillsong, it started in Australia and their main focus is sung worship and being welcoming. I struggle with the way that their services can sometimes look like a rock concert. Their musicians are slick and professional, a lot of money is spent on all the tech and the lighting etc. But that is just their expression of worship, there is so much more to them than that. Who am I to judge them? Apart from anything else they have given the wider church some beautiful music with which to sing God's praises and people who I know who have been to their services have said that they have felt more welcomed and loved than in any other church they have been in. And if we belong to Christ, we are a part of the same body. We not only need each other but we are told we should love each other and seek to build each other up, not criticise and pull each other apart. We all have the same purpose, to worship God. And actually, the efficacy of that worship, the value of what we do on a Sunday is revealed in how our faith is worked out in our daily lives. Are we living for God and for others?

I was talking to Henry and Margaret from the Darvell Community recently and I said to them that the way that they live is challenging to the rest of us. He

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replied, "Well someone has to set an example." Margaret told him off and I said something like, "That wasn't very gracious of you brother". It was a light-hearted exchange; I know that he was mostly joking. The way that they live is one way of working out how to live a wholehearted and integrated life of faith. But it isn't the only way, it isn't about what we have or don't have financially and materially, any more than it is about whether we genuflect, cross ourselves or raise our hands in worship. It doesn't matter if we use incense or say the right words in the right order. It really doesn't matter how far up or down the candle we are. Jesus is only interested in our hearts. Do we love God, are we thankful and humble and seeking to grow in our knowledge and love of Him. Are we encouraged and blessed and wanting to encourage and bless others. Do we look at others with love and compassion as Jesus did? Not wanting to give people what we think they deserve but just wanting to bless them, whoever they are because we have been blessed by God Himself?

We do not know if the woman Jesus healed on that sabbath even knew who He was before He touched her. She didn't ask Him to heal her, but Jesus knew her and had compassion on her and healed her. And the result was that she praised God.

All the leader of the synagogue had to offer was judgement and condemnation. The only people we ever hear Jesus condemn are those who set themselves up as religious leaders but who are hypocrites who are seeking power over people rather than humbly leading people to God and revealing God's love for them. The leader of the synagogue was indignant that the rules had been broken. I once took some teenagers to a Deanery Synod meeting in a church. I took them because discussion was to be about why most of churches in the deanery had no young people. A man attending was indignant

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because one of the youngsters was wearing a baseball cap. He was offended and told the young man off for being disrespectful. The youngster had no idea of the tradition that men should take their hats off in church, but his reply was, “that is exactly why you have no young people in your church.” If the rules we have made up for ourselves are more important than being loving and welcoming, then we have lost our way somewhere. The chap in the baseball cap is a vicar now, so thankfully he wasn’t put off church by being ranted at. Jesus’ reply to the synagogue leader and His other opponents put them to shame and the entire crowd were able to focus again on what was important. Their eyes were turned back to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith and they rejoiced at the wonderful things that he was doing. So let us fix our eyes upon Jesus so that, as it says in Hebrews 12, we will not grow weary and lose heart. And as we worship today let our hearts rejoice in Him.