

## **A Teacher's Healing Call** **Pentecost 13 - 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2010**

### **Readings:**

**Luke 13: 10-17**

This morning I want to talk to you about teaching and teachers. It's a topic with which each of you here has had some first hand experience. We've all had some good teachers who made us excited about what we were learning - I had an excellent English teacher who, for me, brought poetry alive, and an even more remarkable economics teacher who helped me gain first class honours in that subject - a subject that now I look at with great suspicion. Then of course there were the teachers who were not so good, the screamers, the belters - those who seemed at times neither interested in the subject they were teaching nor in us, their long suffering pupils. In fact I wonder if that that's a not the mark of a good teacher - someone who is truly excited by what they teach and who is truly interested in and concerned about those whom they teach.

For a couple of minutes I want you to turn to the person next to you and tell each other of a teacher that you remember. What was it that you remember about them? Was it a good memory or a bad one?

There, I told you that everyone here has had some first hand experience. But let me tell you now a true story of the effects of good teaching on a woman named Mary Bird.

(p263 in "A World of Stories" )

### **Mary Ann Bird tells her story:**

*I grew up knowing that I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear just how much I must have looked to them: A little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech. When my schoolmates would ask, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I became convinced that no one outside my family could love me.*

*There was however a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored - Mrs Leonard by name. She was a short, round, happy, a sparkling lady.*

*Annually we would have a hearing test. I was virtually deaf in on ear, but when I had taken the test in previous years I had learned that if I did not press my hand as tightly upon my ears as I was instructed to do, I could pass the test. Mrs Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn.*

*I knew from past years, that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and we would have to repeat it back, things like: "The sky is blue." or "Do you have new shoes?" This time as I waited there I was to hear words that God must have put into her mouth, seven words that changed my life. Mrs Leonard said in a whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."*

Now there was a teacher! One who taught the one principal lesson all of us need to learn through life - a lesson that some never learn - that we are all valued and loved children of God. Once we have learned that lesson, sometimes from our parents, sometimes from a teacher, sometimes from a friend or from a partner, once we have learned that, then all other learning becomes easier. Teachers who care - that's what our world needs. Teachers of the only lesson that brings about wholeness and healing - that we are all valued and loved children of God.

That's the only Good News worth trumpeting - all other lessons start there.

And it's the lesson Jesus the teacher lived. Our gospel reading starts:

"Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then, there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight."

When Jesus saw her affliction he couldn't help himself for he knew - being bent over, meant a disruption and loss of social relationship for she would have been disowned by those around her. Being crippled would have meant exclusion for worship for she would have been regarded as ritually unclean. Being crippled would have meant a life of begging and a life of loneliness.

One of the commentaries speak of the woman having spondilitis - but sometimes it is not just illness that bends us over.

Often we can be bent over by things other than physical illness. Sometimes it is these other things that cause the illness. Perhaps it was so for this poor woman.

And Jesus recognizes this. For there is talk of a spirit that has crippled her. And Jesus, according to Luke the doctor, uses the word "Apulio" - "to set free" rather than the word "Therapuo" "to cure".

So in English he says "you are set free" to the woman - rather than "you are healed." So then from just what is the woman being set free?

Well Jesus is teaching here, through this healing, that the woman is being set free from oppression without. Perhaps he is freeing her from the constraints of a patriarchal society that dictated a woman's place. Jesus was good at doing that. Look at the many instances in the gospel where Jesus challenged the prevailing views about how women were to be treated.

And perhaps here Jesus has a lesson for his hearers about how religious practices can cripple people - can bend them over. Where people are oppressed by a synagogue or a church that has no time for those who are considered less than perfect. And I am reminded of comments made by a church leader about divorced people, gay people, atheists that have led to neither healing nor setting free. Perhaps Jesus is freeing the woman from such religious intolerance.

And perhaps Jesus is freeing the woman from the oppression from a husband or worse still a family that no longer cares. By calling the woman, by touching her, by raising her up, perhaps he is teaching her that she is a valued and loved child of God.

But oppression does not come just from outside. Sometimes we oppress ourselves. If we hear often enough how unworthy we are soon we believe it to be so and act accordingly. So this woman, like us at times may have been bent over, by external oppression, may also have been living with self-doubt, self-recrimination, guilt, depression.

And Jesus calls her out of this. This is not just a healing, not just another miracle, it is Jesus teaching the woman that she is a valued and loved child of God. Just as on occasions Jesus calls to each of us, in our moments of bent-overness when we are crippled by our own self-doubts, our own self-recriminations, our own guilt and our own depression. At times like these Jesus the teacher is there to touch us and to heal us.

But perhaps most importantly of all, Jesus calls the woman, a daughter of Abraham, and in doing so he is like the teacher we heard about earlier who lovingly said to the little girl with the cleft palate - "I wish you were my little girl." The only difference is that Jesus goes further, he claims the woman - bent over as God's own little girl - he calls her a daughter of Abraham.

To be called by name, to be recognized for who we truly are in God's sight is a powerful healing and freeing thing. It strips away the handicaps that we all suffer from and we are left whole in the sight of God.

So hear these words from John Bell of the Iona community:

***"One of the less savoury aspects of contemporary society seems to be the desire to categorize people according to their deficiencies, rather than call them by their names. So we talk about the physically challenged, the mentally challenged, the abuse victim, the anorexic, the overeater, the divorcee, the single parent, the cross-dresser, the schizophrenic.***

***And true as these descriptions might be, there are two greater truths with which we have to deal in the face of Jesus Christ.***

***The one is that God does not define us by our problems or by our past.***

***And if God does not, why should we?"***

So I wonder how often we here this morning hear that in God's sight we are all whole already. In our various infirmities, Jesus calls us and values us by name, drawing us forwards to healing and wholeness. But sadly perhaps the greatest infirmity of all that we suffer from is deafness.

Can we hear God's gentle call to wholeness?

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