

So A level results are out and show a slight reduction in grade achievements overall. You may well be among those who have family members or friends who are impacted by this- as if A level results, important as they are, are determinative of one's worth or value as a child of God. They may well be the hurdle to higher studies, but are not indicative of much more than ability to perform in a very focussed subject area on a particular day. They do not define our young people.

Definition is exactly the point of today's Gospel too. The woman seems defined by her illness. The religious leaders seem to define the nature of the Sabbath. Yet Jesus explodes the untruth, of this.

Reading any small episode from the scriptures is dangerous because we bring all our current assumptions with us when we reflect upon it.

Recent scholarship has urged us to read slowly, reflectively- not only the words, the text, but to understand the context too. So we need to read with eyes and ears open and let the whole implication of the text sink in.

‘He was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath’- implies that Jesus was fulfilling the role of a prophet- that’s what prophets did- teach.

The woman had been ‘crippled for 18 years’- that is half a lifetime. No NHS, no access to pain control or physiotherapy. Even worse, her illness would have excluded her from social and communal life. She

would have been isolated and stigmatised, worn-down by pain and rejection.

And note- she asks nothing. As she shuffles in to the synagogue, it is Jesus who spots her and says 'You are set free'. He 'lays his hands on her' he breaks the purity laws, touching an ill person and a woman to boot- in the synagogue, and most spectacularly 'on the sabbath'.

Which causes the major row with the religious leaders whose interpretation of the Law determines what can and can't be done on the day of rest and worship. Healing is work, and therefore prohibited, come on Jesus, you know perfectly well there are 'six days on which to heal' – and a bloody spat

ensures. 'you hypocrites' says Jesus, for they untie their animals on the Sabbath so that they can be watered. The Sabbath which is to be a 'delight'.

And further, what Jesus implies is 'this is not just a crippled old woman shuffling around' but this is 'a daughter of Abraham', a precious member of the community of faith, who is set free from bondage on the Sabbath day- just as Jesus on Easter Day is set free of bondage to death on a cross.

And imagine the scene- the people astounded at this 'released' woman whom they've known for ever, this Jesus who dares to speak truth to power, these foolish religious leaders who look mean spirited and bloated with self-importance in their response.

I bet nobody stayed behind for coffee that day- they were all bursting out of the doors to spread the news of the encounter.

Jesus refuses to let illness define personhood, social standing or access to the love of God. Jesus refuses to let controlling powers limit the freedom and creativity of love in action, 24/7 for everyone, everywhere.

As the Lambeth Conference once again stumbles over issues of human sexuality, human diversity, perhaps this incident in the synagogue in dusty remote Nazareth still speaks with huge power- for there is something of the Emperor's New Clothes about this encounter- by his words and actions Jesus of Nazareth enables us to see things as they really are, and as they really can be. As they are-

with all our personal desire to make life in our own image, to control, to get others to conform to our preferences. And as they can be- liberating, revolutionary, freeing into fullness of life.

My Methodist roots cry out with words from a great Wesley hymn:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night

Thine eye difused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon filled with light

My chains fell off, my heart was free

I rose went forth and followed thee.

For the chains which we place on ourselves and others , defining success, self-worth, status, place in the world- are shattered by a God whom explodes all our attempts at control, save that of love. For our God is a consuming fire.