

SERMON:

Mass Sunday, 25 August 2019:

10:30am Service

at

**Christ The Saviour, New Broadway,
Ealing, London W5 2XA.**

**Isaiah 58: 9-14
Hebrews 12: 18-29
Luke 13: 10-17**

The Revd Jonathan Aitken

Sermon Christ the Saviour Church, Ealing on Sunday 25 August 2019
By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

I was here in your church some six weeks ago, completely on my own with your Vicar Father Richard, doing what the clergy call "mass practice". This was for my First Mass as a new priest at my home church of St Matthew's, Westminster and for my First Communion as a Prison Chaplain in HMP Pentonville.

I hope it was not too obvious that today was only the third time I have ever been a Celebrant at a mass or communion service!

But if there were any glitches this morning they were entirely my fault. There were certainly not down to Father Richard to whom I am profoundly grateful for being such an encouraging mentor and spiritual formation tutor to me during my year in training as a Deacon.

But, I guess, even the finest tutor cannot really prepare a novice celebrant for a service where things go wrong in the most unexpected way.

This happened during my first communion at Pentonville.

And as you have just heard the same unpredictability also occurred during the synagogue service described in our Gospel reading today.

What happened in Pentonville last month was that just as I got up to preach to a jam-packed prison chapel, the service was interrupted by an excitable heckler.

He was a Caribbean prisoner who started jumping up and down shouting, "Not you! Not you again! You always talk such blankety, blank rubbish!"

Now I may be a new priest, but I am also an old hand when it comes to dealing with hecklers.

After thirty years in politics I rather welcome a bit of noise from hecklers because they liven up the proceedings.

So, I stopped the prison officers from arresting the heckler.

Instead I told him that Jesus loved him – which slowed him down a bit.

And then a group of Pentecostal prisoners, also mainly from the Caribbean, started joining in on my side – shouting things like

"Yeah man, de Preacher's right, Jesus loves you man,
So why don't you shut your mouth
and let de Preacher talk about de love of Jesus".

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Now, this was not like the start of your average Church of England sermon, but it got everyone interested and engaged. The heckler did quieten down, the prisoners became far more attentive and they seemed to be really interested in a sermon on the parable of *The Good Samaritan*.

Deo Gratias for the heckler, I thought!

Now if you reflect on our Gospel reading today, it too is all about an unpredictable service which went off-piste but was greatly helped by Pharisee hecklers.

Just imagine the scene.

Jesus – a faithful synagogue attender – just like many of you are faithful church goers – probably began with the traditional liturgy of the Torah – until he saw a woman who was bent double with a crippling infirmity.

These days in 21st Century Britain, thanks to modern orthopaedic surgery, it is rare to see people doubled up because of curvature of the spine.

But you still see it in Africa and Jesus saw it in First Century Galilee in this woman in the synagogue who had been crippled for 18 years.

The Greek word here SUN-KUP-TEIN translates as "bent over" – probably by the ancient inflammatory disease of discs and joints in the back.

So, Jesus, as he so often did in his ministry, took compassion on this lady's sufferings. He called her over, laid his hands on her, and he healed her saying:

"Woman, you are set free from your infirmity".

Now, I think if we saw a dramatic healing miracle here at Christ the Saviour we would burst into wild applause and cheering with Hosannas and Hallelujahs.

Not so the elders of this synagogue!

The Pharisees, who as always were much more fussy about rules, procedures and systems than they were about caring for individuals, gave Jesus a hard time.

The Pharisee hecklers attacked him. As Luke reports:

"The leader of the synagogue became indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath".

By now the synagogue service must have been exploding towards chaos.

Jesus took on the Pharisee hecklers and really let them have it.

“You hypocrites”, he began fiercely attacking their double standards.

“You look after your farm animals on the Sabbath, but you don’t like this poor woman being healed on the Sabbath”.

Well clearly the congregation was on Jesus’s side.

“All his opponents were put to shame”, Luke tells us, “and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he had done”.

So, what do we learn about the character of Jesus from this beautifully told story?

First, we learn Jesus himself was a faithful synagogue goer who regularly went to worship God on the Sabbath.

Secondly, we learn that his worship and love of God his father was driven not by rules or linguistic forms or liturgical perfection but by his heart – the compassion he felt in his heart for the suffering woman.

Thirdly, we learn that Jesus's compassion lifted him, impulsively, out of the boxed in regulations of the Pharisees. He used his healing powers to answer an individual human need which transcended the tramlines of Pharasaic bureaucracy,

Fourthly, we learn that Jesus hated hypocrisy.

In his ministry he was often so gentle and forgiving to sinners of the flesh like the woman taken in adultery, or the prostitutes he invited to supper, or criminals like Zacchaeus and finally to the thief on the cross.

But he was tough with the greedy, the selfish and above all the hypocrites, who are the bad guys of this story.

And he would surely be tough today with our modern sins of self-serving, double standards, bogus political correctness and all forms of humbug and hypocrisy.

Finally, I think we can see from this story what a powerfully attractive teacher Jesus was.

Not for him the gloomy pessimism of too many of our modern opinion formers and commentators. He would never have embraced "Project Fear".

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He was the optimistically uncompromising advocate and healer of the poor, the sick, the suffering and the weak.

His mission through the Good News of the Gospel could have been called "Project Joy".

Just look at the last line of the story in today's reading:

"And the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he had done".

On this glorious Bank Holiday weekend Sunday, let us also joyfully rejoice the wonderful things Jesus still does in healing and transforming contemporary lives and hearts.

Amen.