

Sunday 24th August 2025, Trinity 10. Benefice Holy Communion, Oswaldkirk.

I don't know how many of you have seen the film, 'The Shack'. In it the main character, Mack, meets each of the Trinity and is healed of his grief and bitterness. In one scene he is talking with Jesus and asks the question 'what do you think about religion?' to which Jesus replies, 'Too many rules and regulations!'

It often seems to be the case that religion or perceived religious practise takes precedence over compassion and loving relationships, and we are all guilty of it in one way or another. So often Christians are accused of not practising what they preach, that what we declare and demonstrate on a Sunday has no resemblance to how we behave towards people the rest of the time. Jesus frequently points this out to those who were the religious people in his time and denounced them as hypocrites, which literally means 'actor'. And that is an accurate word when people put on an act of being religious rather than revealing who they really are, a child of God made in His image and called to reveal His love.

An example of this is in today's Gospel. The crippled woman in today's gospel reading represents, in a symbolic way, the whole human race. We are all bent over and crippled with the heavy burden of sin and separation from God, unable to stand up straight, and to live in relationship with God our creator and one another as we are meant to. We are all in need of help, in need of a Saviour, and that is precisely what Jesus came to be; the world's Saviour, our Saviour, who frees us from the burden and restores our relationship with His Father and each other.

There is also another person in this story, the leader of the synagogue, the religious person. He, too, needs healing, like everyone else, but he doesn't want to know it, so he puts up a façade of religious practise to hide behind. He doesn't want to let go of his religious piety, his ego, his self-righteous actions and to acknowledge his need for a Saviour. As a result, he acts in a way that is truly shameful when witnessing a woman miraculously healed by God's Son. He is only concerned with pointing out that people were not supposed to work on the Sabbath. He is also reluctant to confront Jesus directly, so instead, he tells the crowd to come back another day if they wanted to be cured, but not on the Sabbath.

We may ask how anyone could be so cruel. The woman who was healed by Jesus had been crippled for 18 years which is a long time to be unable to stand up straight. So, imagine how heartless and cruel you would have to be to do what the leader of that synagogue did that day. He didn't give thanks for this miracle but simply focussed on the fact that this was done on the wrong day. In doing so, he believed, he was obeying God's command, honouring the Sabbath day, and doing all the things that his 'religion' required. He was putting on an act. He did not show compassion, rejoice in a miracle, or witness the Son of God bringing salvation.

How often do we do the same? Put on an act? Maybe not as blatantly as this but perhaps in more subtle ways. How often does our own religious practise get in the way of caring for others with humility and compassion or rejoicing in God's message? This story is not just about the healing of the crippled woman, it is about the healing that we all need. Like the synagogue leader, we stand tall and proud, we pontificate and think we've got it all figured out, that we can manage on our own and give everyone the benefit of our opinion. We may stand in quiet judgment of someone who is suffering, thinking, that if they had tried

harder, they wouldn't be in that mess, it's their own fault and are not worthy of help. Just like the leader of the synagogue, who was solely concerned about his religious rules, we are all in need of healing, not necessarily physical healing. but to be healed to see the world in a new way, with a kinder heart, the heart of God where actions reveal that love is more important than rules.

Just being religious isn't the real story because it's an act. That road ends in desperation, despair and death. It is being spiritually crippled and unable to stand until we turn to the one who died for our sins, to the only one who can take away our burden, take our hand and allow us to stand upright in His presence in freedom and at peace. We have come here today, not to show how religious we are, and we get it all right, but to acknowledge and confess we often get it all wrong, not because we are strong, but because we are weak and in need of saving, by Jesus and each other. We are here today, not to be like the leader of the synagogue, and stand proudly before the Lord self-opinionated and uncaring; but to be like the woman bent in pain, who reaches out for healing, that only Jesus can provide.

Thanks be to God. Amen.