

## Liberating Words

*Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17*

In the time of Covid in 2020, Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth said: *"We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return. We will be with our friends again. We will be with our families again. We will meet again."*

F D R Roosevelt in his 1933 inauguration speech: *"...let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."*

The 1320 Declaration of Arbroath says about the C14th aspirations of the Scottish nation at the end of the Wars of Independence: *"... for, as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself."*

The late American Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg said, about gender equality: *"It's not women's liberation: it is women's and men's liberation."*

In the darkest hours of World War Two, amongst many speeches, Winston Churchill said: *"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind...You ask what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs. Victory in spite of all terror. Victory however long and hard the road may be. For without victory there is no survival."*

Martin Luther King said: *"I have a dream that one day down in Alabama...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers...I have a dream today."*

Jesus of Nazareth said: *"Woman, you are freed from your infirmity."*

Liberating words. Words that have agency. They have impact. They have power. They move us and shift our understanding and our perception. They open up new vistas. They clarify the obscure. Liberating words. They have the power to set us free because they have the power to impel us to be something and do something better.

Think of the people in your lives who have said just the right thing at the right time and it made all the difference in the world to you and your well-being.

Equally, think of those people in your lives who have said the wrong thing, the hurtful thing, the spiteful thing, the scars of those words on your heart and soul still tender to the touch. That set you back weeks, months, years, and from which you might feel you will never be free.

Think of the power of the words the young prophet Jeremiah heard from God. *"Before I formed You in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...Be not afraid, for I am with you to deliver you..."* What person of any age would not be stirred and strengthened and emboldened by God speaking to them these liberating words. You're not too young, you're not too old; you're not too inexperienced, you're not passed it. *"I am with you..."* I wonder if today anyone here in Church or watching online, facing big, daunting, life-challenging situations, needs to hear these words, from God. For you.

Some task, something at work; some responsibility, something at home; some existential threat, something at Church. And to you, this morning, God is saying, *"I am with you..."*

Journeying through Galilee on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues one Sabbath. To be in the synagogue as was Jesus' custom was to be at the heart of Judaism and at the heart of the lived-out faith of the community. There they learned and discussed things of belief; there they would sing and pray. A gathering together of the community.

An unnamed crippled woman attended. She had a severely bowed spine and couldn't stand up straight. She'd suffered this for eighteen years. Her world had been one that meant it was a strain to go see the sun, the sky, the stars. For eighteen years she had been accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world had been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand up straight could see at a glance. She was used to it. No one questioned her fate. At the synagogue, she hadn't come to ask for healing. It is Jesus Who saw her, and called her over. He laid His hands upon her and the words He used said, *"Woman, you are freed from your infirmity."* And she stood up straight, and she praised God. Liberating words.

Jesus was criticised. Was it because the local synagogue leader was defending the strict rules around what was and wasn't allowed on the Sabbath? No work, no fun, no healing. Jesus was having none of it. "You free your farm animals from the manger and lead them to water on the Sabbath. Is it so wrong that this woman, a good Jew, daughter of Abraham, to be loosed from what has bound her for eighteen years on this Sabbath day?" If it is good enough for the animals we care for, surely it should be good enough for this child of God? Mercy is surely more important than rigid rules. God might overflow the bounds of old practices so that, from time to time, or often, new things might be done. Oh, and a woman crippled with a life-altering condition might be made to feel better. She was set free, by the liberating words of Jesus.

This story is more than a literal healing, whatever that might have been. Might it be that Jesus is talking about the woman's crippled body being like the neglected community? Might it be that this woman with her maladies represented the wider community? For eighteen years she had been crippled, bent over, not able to stand up straight. Had the community, in other ways, been equally crippled, restricted, bound and also needed to be set free to praise God as the woman did? Did that community also need to hear Jesus' liberating words?

Which leads me to wonder in our Church, and in our city and country and world, can you think of things from which we need to be set free? Attitudes, still, about women, or people with different sexual lifestyles, or people with a different colour of skin, or people from a different religious background? From what crippling paralysis of action does the world need to be set free when it comes to calling out Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli Government for its genocidal Palestinian genocide and the moral outrage the Israeli Government's refusal to allow sufficient aid into Gaza which is causing the man-made catastrophe of famine? How are weapons of destruction still getting to Israel? And be in no doubt that there are some amongst Hamas who, if the tables were turned, would be doing the same to Israel. Call that out too.

From what crippling paralysis of action does the world need to be set free when it comes to calling out Vladimir Putin and his cynical and ruthless bombing of Ukraine whilst engaging in the lip-service of Alaskan appeasement talks, conceding nothing, to a gullible American president?

From what crippling paralysis of action does the world need to be set free when it comes to realising there are resources to tackle world-wide famine, drought, poverty, fuel and housing shortages if there was sufficient political and community will to share what we have in the way God intends in our global village. Instead of posturing behind nationalistic flag-waving whilst

blatantly ignoring the commandment, the *Jesus* commandment, to love our neighbours as ourselves.

And us - what about us? From what crippling paralysis of action, and attitudes, and behaviour patterns, and prejudices, and half-hearted commitment do we need to be set free in the way we live our lives so that we might play our part?

When Jesus spoke His liberating words in that synagogue His adversaries were put to shame and the people rejoiced. What liberating words do we need to hear, and then put into practice, so that we, and our Church, our city, our world might be able to stand up straight again and see the sun and sky and stars, and the mercy of God shining on us with healing and hope and mercy and love today? When Jesus says to us, "You are freed", and whatever bonds that hold us back and down are loosed, do we, will we, stand up straight, and do the things, I mean really do the things, that God knows will make our lives and our world, together, a better place? We need rules, but we need rules that work for mercy, grace, justice, healing and peace.

It's a time to stand up straight. For ourselves, for our Church, for our city and world, for God, and be the difference for good that is so desperately needed today.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**