

## **Worship for Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> August 2022**

### **Call to worship**

*On a summer Sunday, the dullness of the day contradicts our hopes.  
We long for continuing brightness, warmth, sunshine,  
yet we know our expectations are often confounded.*

*Nevertheless, we have left home and family and familiarity, and perhaps also  
demands and cares, and set out for this place of worship.  
May our hopes be met here.*

*As we enjoy conversations with friends, do the work we are given in Jesus' name,  
as we listen to the organ and sing and pray, receive and offer fellowship,  
may we also encounter our God.*

*In the busyness and in the stillness, in the silence and in the bustle,  
deep in our own thoughts and in our meeting with others,  
may we find God again, and know we are loved, cherished, and treasured,  
by God and by these people.*

### **Hymn 210: Awake, my soul, and with the sun**

### **Prayer**

*God who sees everything, and understands all that we are, you love us. Our  
imperfections, shortcomings and mistakes never outrun your mercy and grace, so we  
come to you without fear.*

*God who hears everything: our unspoken fears, our needless worries, our negative  
comments about others and about ourselves, you cherish us. Our best unsaid  
remarks never take us out of your reach, and so we come to you without hesitation.*

*God who knows everything, including, especially, those aspects of ourselves that lurk  
within us, mostly hidden, you nevertheless treasure us. Even our darkest secrets  
never dent your kindness towards us. We come, expecting, but never taking for  
granted, your goodness.*

*Almighty God, in short, nothing may keep us apart from you. So we come, as we are,  
dragging our baggage behind us, your children, hoping and praying for a more  
wholesome future. We come in the name of Christ Jesus, he who has the power to  
make all things new, as he has done from the beginning.*

*Living God, ready us to hear your word. Tune our ears to you, that in the words of  
the gospel we may hear the declaration of Jesus to a woman who was suffering: a*

*declaration of freedom. Help us to recognise all that imprisons us, then bring these thoughts and ways of being captive to you. And then, in the power of the Holy Spirit, set us free: for worship, for relationships with you and with each other, for the life of the church, and to bring freedom in every place.*

**Amen.**

**Reading: Luke 13 verses 10 – 17**

**Hymn 606: Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders**

**Sermon**

**Luke 13 verse 12: When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are free from your infirmity."**

Holidays in Spain have been off the agenda for me these last two or three years, not least because, unfortunately, the Church of Scotland in Fuengirola, to which I was so happy to receive invitations over the years, closed her doors after the Covid 19 pandemic combined with other factors to make its future unsustainable. But my mind always goes to that country when this story of Jesus healing a woman with a bent back comes round in the lectionary. Like me, many of you will have enjoyed a visit to the amazing city of Barcelona, and spent time on its main and very famous thoroughfare, Las Ramblas. It was there, one very sunny day, that I saw her: a woman who has lived in my memory ever since. Amid the throng, the stark, dazzling whiteness of the stonework, flashed with ever colour imaginable, I caught a glimpse of her: this old woman, clad entirely in black, making her slow, painful way, bent almost double, and grasping a stick that was at least as tall as she was. And then she was gone....

Why she has stayed with me I have no idea, except that I imagine the woman in our story today might have looked like her. Luke's description is this: she **had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.** Imagine her lot, if you possibly can. One writer put it like this: *For eighteen years this unnamed woman must strain to see the sun, the sky, the stars. For eighteen years she has been accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see with just a glance.*

Eighteen years. A bad back gets us down after only a few days. Sciatica, which I know afflicts a few of you, is crippling and can be entirely life limiting while it lasts. Osteoporosis.... A slipped disc.... Arthritis. All common. Each, in its own way, an absolute trial. And then, one day....

.... Jesus was in the synagogue, teaching. He looked up, and there she was, right in front of him. She does absolutely nothing. Maybe, although she can hear him, she can't see him. Maybe she knows who he is, and his reputation, but it never crosses her mind that he might take an interest in her, personally. Maybe she has long since given up any hope of things changing. Well, you would, wouldn't you, after eighteen years? But then, mid-sentence - who knows? - Jesus' eye is on her, and, before anything else can happen, he addresses her, like this: **Woman, you are free from your infirmity.**

Sometimes Jesus heals in a different way. Sometimes, a person comes, explicitly seeking healing. Near the beginning of his gospel, Mark tells us about a man with leprosy, who fell on his knees and begged Jesus with these words: **If you are willing, you can make me clean.** That signifies an urgent, personal initiative. No sooner has that tale been told than he tells us about a paralysed man who had to rely on his friends to get access to Jesus, and that these friends ripped off some of the roof and let their companion down through the resulting hole into the centre of the room where Jesus was engaged with the crowd that had gathered there. This was also an urgent initiative, but it relied on third parties. On other occasions, and sometimes in a synagogue, Jesus is the initiative taker. When he heals a man with a deformed hand, again in an unnamed synagogue, he tells him: **Stand up in front of everyone.** Not indicating, perhaps, that Jesus would be winning any prizes for tact or sensitivity. And then there's another of my favourites, the story of the woman who had suffered haemorrhages for twelve years. She, too, pressed in upon Jesus in a throng, demonstrating colossal faith with her words: **If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.**

We're starting to realise that healing takes place in a variety of ways. That of the bent over woman is one in which the initiative is taken wholly by Jesus. We're not even sure that she had seen Jesus at the point when he addressed her. And it's interesting in this way, too: he announces the healing before it actually happens. First: **Woman, you are free from your infirmity.** Then: **he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.**

But something else, quite beyond a face value reading and interpretation of this story, fascinates me. It's indicated by the phrase that seeks to give a cause, if not an

explanation, for the woman's state. **A woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years.** Of course to its original readers, it would be clear what gospel writer Luke meant: that the woman's frailty was caused by an *evil* spirit, a notion which, to us, sounds fanciful, primitive, and downright wrong. (I wonder, in passing, what explanations for illnesses, mental, physical and emotional, we might have come up with if we'd lived in Jesus' time). And the fact that Luke does not say "an evil spirit" gave me freedom, I think, to veer sideways, and ask, what kind of "spirits" are crippling us....

I ask because I think there can't be many of us who do not lug around behind ourselves self-imposed burdens. (To be clear, I am not in any way talking about physical illness here). Think about an inability to forgive. For some mysterious reason, considering we, above all people, are meant to have signed up to a gospel that *depends* on forgiveness, this is one failing some churchy people seem to cling to. I've lost count, over the years, of stories told to me by people who have "fallen out with the church" – for church substitute presbytery, their elder, or, best of all, the minister. A union of churches takes place, the building you habitually worshipped in is closed, and you decide, there and then, that you will never darken (it's an apt word, actually) the door again. Or the minister didn't come up to your expectations (maybe your expectations are too high and, after all, the minister's an imperfect human being, just like you), and, without a backward glance, off you flounced. Again, I've lost count. But who loses? The person who leaves loses, because, by pushing aside an attempt at reconciliation or healing, you are left to take with you a spirit of unforgiveness. And, in the end, that just makes you bitter, while all around you, others eventually move on. Or think about the attitude that says, "my way is the only way". Call it ignorance. Call it arrogance. Call it such a dire lack of confidence that you can't think you might actually be wrong without your whole self collapsing. This, too, is acrippler. It makes you hard to work with, stops you being a team player, and means you are very hard to get alongside in a church setting, where the whole essence of our community is that we learn from one another, and, when necessary, defer to one another. It also increases your chances of running headlong into a mistake, and limits your horizons and possibilities until you might, after all, just as well be crippled.

Or take this one: a spirit of anxiety. We worry about everything: our health... our future... our families... our friends... our finances... our homes... what folk think of us... relationships... even the future of our church. Again, this is a puzzler for church folk. How many times does our Lord Jesus tell his friends: don't worry? The sermon on the mount: **Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.....** When the

disciples are on a boat in a storm: **why are you afraid?** And when he counsels them before his death: **Do not be worried and upset** and **Let not your hearts be troubled.** Yes, we all worry to some extent. But some of us make it into an art form, and we need to hear Jesus reassure us....

.... or maybe what we really need to hear Jesus say is the word he spoke to the bent double women: **you are set free from your infirmity.** And then, given that possibility, perhaps right out of the blue, we need to be ready for something quite scary: for Jesus to reach out, touch us, and place his hand firmly upon us. We know what happened to the woman when Jesus did just that: **she straightened up and praised God.**

Whatever spirit has gotten a hold of us: a spirit of unforgiveness, or believing our way is the only way, or paralysing anxiety, it has made us the equivalent of being bent over, unable to see, to move freely, to embrace the life that God keeps on giving us with all its possibilities. But no matter how long we have been this way, even if it's in the region of eighteen years, there is hope. Where Jesus is, there is always, always hope. But to allow yourself to be rid of something as familiar and oddly comforting as an old coat takes courage. Maybe the woman in Barcelona's fortitude was shown by the fact she was out in the busy throng that is Las Ramblas. I think Luke's woman's courage was made plain by the simple fact that she got along to worship that day. When she set out, I'm sure she expected she would return home in the same state in which she left. But Jesus had seen her and invited her to straighten up and praise God. The invitation to us all is just the same today in respect of the burdens we have imposed upon ourselves. I hope that, before the day is out, your burden will have been lifted, your step a little firmer and quicker, and that you will, like the woman, praise God, who likes nothing more than to lift a weight from our backs.

## **Hymn 719: The one who longs to make us whole**

### **Offering**

### **Prayer**

*Living God, it is for wholeness that we long. We live fragmented lives, sometimes pulled, needlessly, in too many directions. We balance responsibilities and cares, work and pleasure, family and church life. But you are not always top of our list, when all the while your desire is that your love might reign in us. Let that be so. May our lives,*

*relationships and service here and in every place be governed by your gracious, kindly will.*

*God who longs for peace, we pray for peace in every corner of your world, and for those whose task is to make peace: aid agencies, diplomats, negotiators. May we make peace, too, by being understanding, gentle and patient with one another. As we ease towards a new way of being the church, let us open our hearts and minds to the possibility of working more closely with others, even our neighbouring congregations!*

*God who demands justice, we thank you for those working in our communities to bring a fairer distribution of food and other vital resources. And we pray, refusing to believe that this is hopeless, for the government, that it might always be alert to the plight of those who fret and worry to distraction over bills they have no prospect of paying. May those who have sought and been given political power work relentlessly for the good of all.*

*God who is gentle and endlessly compassionate, we pray for one another. May the stronger here reach out to those in greater need. May the richer here give proportionately for the good of all. And may all of us believe that we have our unique part to play in establishing and maintaining the well-being of all.*

**Amen.**

### **Hymn 188: Thou hidden Love of God, whose height**

#### **Benediction**

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.*

**Amen.**