

Trinity 10 [Proper 16 (Year C)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 25 August 2019.

Readings: Isaiah 58 vv 9b-end and Luke 13 vv 10-17

Traffic wardens are never going to be the most popular occupational group.

My own experience of traffic wardens has been relatively uneventful, apart from one day in Liverpool. I had parked carefully and purchased a ticket from the machine near by. For some reason, I had parked my car with the back against the kerb and the front by the street. The instructions on the parking ticket stated that the ticket had to be visible from the pavement; so I carefully put the ticket in the rear window of the car. Imagine my surprise when I returned to the car and found an ominous penalty notice on the windscreen! Apparently, my parking ticket should have been in the windscreen, even though the windscreen was facing away from the kerb. To cut a long story short, Liverpool City Council accepted that the traffic warden had been over zealous and the penalty notice was cancelled.

It was a classic case of the 'jobsworth' mentality which seems to affect some people in most walks of life.

Today's Gospel reading suggests to me that what we might call the 'jobsworth' mentality was alive and well at the time of Jesus, from people who ought to have known better.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue (in fact, it was the last time that Jesus is recorded as doing this). A woman who had been crippled for many years comes along and, spontaneously and out of simple compassion, Jesus heals her. But then we meet the 'jobsworth' mentality in the leader of the synagogue. There is no argument about the importance and relevance of the Law. What is at stake is how the Law is applied.

Jesus does not come to destroy or invalidate the Law. That was a central part of the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel which began in the time of Moses. But over the years, the central and essential goodness of the Law had been overshadowed by concerns about the details that the lawyers and teachers, the Scribes and the Pharisees, had built on to the original structure of the Law.

When the Law is under discussion, Jesus' overriding concern is to remind people to use their common sense, working out the Summary of the Law: love God; love your neighbour as yourself. So, in relation to the Law and the Sabbath, Jesus suggests that there are circumstances in which common sense and other humanitarian considerations take priority over the strict letter of the Law, if that is how we love God and love our neighbour.

The idea of the Sabbath has always been important for Jews, and remains so today. Observance of the Sabbath is written into the Ten Commandments. It was emphasised by the prophets. God's people remember that they owe him their existence by resting on the seventh day, just as God did in the story of creation in Genesis. The Sabbath is also a reminder to the Jews of Israel's time of slavery in Egypt. They remember how they were worked almost to death, and resolve not to behave in that way to their own servants, but rather to ensure that they too have one day a week to rest. And so the Sabbath becomes a defining characteristic for the Jews – almost a badge of identity, which distinguishes them from their neighbours.

Jesus does not criticise any of this. He does *not* think that there should *not* be a day of rest, a day when worship of God takes priority. But Jesus sees that the Law has become so fixed that it has ceased to do what it was designed to do. It has become an excuse for injustice, for failure really to do what God wants his people to do.

When the leader of the synagogue challenges Jesus' reaction to the crippled woman, he thinks that he is defending God's Law, as a good, religious man. But he is putting the rule above the claims of love. Jesus sees human need in front of him. His priority is to bring much-needed healing to one whom he describes, almost provocatively, as 'a daughter of Abraham'. As such, she has a claim on the community of faith which supersedes the claim of the Law. She is in need, today, even though her disability has lasted for eighteen years. The time to act, suggests Jesus, is, therefore today. She cannot wait for tomorrow. Love demands that she is healed today.

Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath remains a challenge to religious people today. He was in conflict with the good, honourable, religious people of his day, who patiently and carefully preserved the rules of their religious heritage. This was not, and is not, a bad thing to do. But there are times and circumstances when this is inadequate.

Jesus tells us, in essence, that no rule, even one of God's own rules, must be allowed to take precedence over the claims of love and human need.

This, of course, raises huge questions for the Christian Church today, as we grapple with great and important questions. There are so many issues on which good, religious people have strong opinions, based on the teaching and tradition of the Church. But sometimes, the demand of love seems to suggest that the teaching and tradition should take second place. Our prayer must constantly be for wisdom to know when we should uphold the teaching and tradition and when we should respond in love.

One of the great concerns in our world today is the all too apparent growth in religious fundamentalism and literalism, in Christianity, in Islam, and in so many different religions and philosophies. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus reminds us that blind and unthinking fundamentalism and literalism are not fully and authentically Christian. There is no place for the 'jobsworth' mentality amongst the people of God.