

Luke 13:10-17

### **Set Free**

#### **Wouldn't it be lovely?**

Picture the scene – the lowly flower seller on the steps of the theatre in Covent Garden trying to persuade the gentry to buy some of her blooms for their fine ladies for a few coppers – to eke an existence that would keep body and soul together. In the film version of Pygmalion, My Fair Lady, young Eliza Doolittle is one such young woman, played by Audrey Hepburn. While she does her best to be pleasant to her would be customers, she dreams about how life might be better, more comfortable for her. Her ambitions are quite limited really, though still from her point of view, way beyond her. But there is no harm in dreaming:

All I want is a room somewhere  
Far away from the cold night air  
With one enormous chair  
Oh, wouldn't it be lovely?

Lots of chocolate for me to eat  
Lots of coal makin' lots of heat  
Warm face, warm hands, warm feet  
Oh, wouldn't it be lovely?

Not a lot to you and me but to her (and to many more people even today) the thought of a room out of the cold, a chair to call her own, a wee treat, and enough heat to keep her warm was a wonderful thought, though something to dream about rather than to actually possess. But things move on – a phonetics professor Henry Higgins bets his friend Colonel Pickering that he could teach her to speak “properly” and could pass her off as a duchess. And so, after lots of ups and downs she successfully does just that at an Embassy Ball, though Higgins played by Rex Harrison makes the mistake of treating Eliza as the subject of his experiment rather than as a real person with feelings. Perhaps you might enjoy revisiting the film for some light relief! Was it her speech that set her free? Is it still the case that the way we talk can influence the life we lead? Maybe a little less so than in Edwardian London or even the sixties when the film was made but perhaps that bias hasn't altogether disappeared. Wouldn't it be lovely if youngsters could grow up not just to DREAM about living safely, with a roof over their head, food, clothing, warmth and some education and job prospects and (thinking of the chocolate!) some simple pleasures BUT actually be able to enjoy these things as standard.

#### **Free from ... in the 1<sup>st</sup> century**

By way of an introduction and to get us thinking about some of the many things that can bind people even in a society that prides itself on freedom, touching on Eliza Doolittle

and her diction served a purpose. However, you won't find her or Henry Higgins in the gospels! Our passage this morning highlights an unnamed woman who had suffered from a chronic health issue for 18 years; she was bent double and couldn't straighten. Undoubtedly, this would have had a devastating impact on her life – pain and suffering without a doubt, but almost certainly too – financially and socially. Was she married? Was she able to carve out a meagre living for herself? Did she have friends? People then pointed the finger at evil spirits and it was assumed that any serious physical ailment was caused by some kind of evil spiritual force – usually seen as the poor individual's own fault - they must have done something really bad to deserve it! Often, on top of their physical suffering, they were shunned by society, were poor, if not destitute and had a miserable life. So, when Jesus comes along and says to her “You are free from your illness”, it was a massive life changing moment. It wasn't just a case of “Oh, my back isn't sore anymore” – though even now in the days of painkillers, physio and chiropractors, relief from back pain can be significant. For that woman, this was an end to 18 years of misery – an end to social exclusion, poverty, humiliation, isolation; freedom to walk tall, to be the person she had hoped to be. In short, Jesus gave her her life back. We don't know whether she lived from then on entirely in line with God's purposes but we are told that after Jesus healed her, “she straightened herself up AND PRAISED GOD”! She acknowledged that the transformation in her life was God's doing – and she was quick to give him the glory. There's not a whole lot more we're told about her - but before we move on just try to imagine what an enormous change Jesus brought about in her – she was a new woman! [*pause just for a few seconds*].

### **Spoilsports vs Jesus' priority to people**

Why is it though that there is always a downside? When something good happens there are those who are negative about it. It might be a bit of jealousy – the green eyed monster raises its head. There might be some comment like “What have they done to deserve that?” “Why couldn't that have been me?” or something else is said or done to diminish or spoil the celebration or to try to deflect the attention away from the individual with the good news and on to them. It's almost as though some people can't bear to have other people celebrating, having success or generally being happy unless they are too – ideally with lots of folk knowing about it. If they can't share in the success, then they will do down those who are celebrating. Negativity seems to be so prevalent. In the passage, it was the religious authorities that were pouring cold water on the woman's healing and celebration – never mind that she and the bystanders were full of praise to God. The leader of the synagogue is angry because Jesus chose to heal the woman on the sabbath – it would have been classed as work and work on the sabbath wasn't allowed. That the healing had so obviously brought such glory to God, as well as remarkable transformation to the woman, seems to have been lost on him. There is a place for rules and regulations even in church circles, but this is so patently an example of Jesus doing what is good, right, loving and kind AND HONOURING to GOD that more than fulfils

the intention of the sabbath to encourage due honour to God. We need to watch lest our religious rules and regulations get in the way of God's loving purposes instead of encouraging us to further them. That's not licence for us to ignore every rule we come up against, but it is a pointer to the priority Jesus gives to PEOPLE IN NEED over against religious rules and scruples – a priority that we need to bear in mind.

### **Freedom from ... in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

If Jesus' teaching is to have its true impact on us then we mustn't simply look back on how it applied to his original hearers, we need to allow it to speak to us today – and to do so in a way that brings about the kind of significant change that Jesus wants. So what kind of freedom does Jesus intend that the gospel should have in our lives and in the lives of our neighbours in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We've already touched on some when we were thinking about the dreams young people might have for their lives – but we could go wider. Not a definitive list but surely Jesus would want everyone to be able to experience freedom from danger, from war, from poverty; freedom from homelessness, from abuse or exploitation, freedom from manipulation, from hunger; freedom FOR as well as FROM so freedom to be able to grow and develop in safety, to have an education, to have reasonable health and prospects of meaningful employment, freedom to love and make friends, to have some time to relax, freedom to choose how they should be governed, to live in a world where people matter more than possessions, where adequate thought is given to the long term like climate, food – where people don't need to choose between food and heat or where neither is affordable, where there is freedom to believe and to practice faith, where to follow Jesus won't lead to prison or persecution; where love, joy, peace, kindness and generous self giving are encouraged and fostered, where signs of the kingdom of love are obvious and widespread, where even the heaviest of burdens – spiritual as well as physical can be dealt with by the love, forgiveness and grace of God. Is that a pipedream? It may seem like it when most of the news stories and images on our screens tell a very different story, but the gospels are no mere fairy tale. The good news of Jesus has been reshaping the lives of individuals like you and me for centuries and Jesus is still in the business of “making all things new”, so take heart – he can still set people free. Eliza might say “wouldn't that be lovely” but perhaps like the woman in the passage we might just say “Praise God!”

May the Lord bless you! Amen.