**THE CRIPPLED WOMAN St Luke 13:10-17**

I don’t know if you are familiar with the writings of the famous Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz, who died in 2006, the only writer in Arabic to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. In one of his short stories titled ‘Evil Adored’ he tells the story of a figure who is both Christlike and Socratic and brings peace and contentment to the society in which he lives. Being controversial like both of these people he is at first arrested and then set free. In his joy he wins over rich and poor alike to his utopian philosophy so that evil disappears totally from society. But the three friends of the triumvirate, a magistrate, a constable and a doctor, who control everything that goes on in the town, soon begin to worry. There are no sick patients, no crime, so they are in danger of losing their livelihoods from the ruler. They decide to kill the righteous man but he suddenly disappears and evil returns to the place.

This story has a direct relevance to the healing of the cripple in the Gospel reading for today. Christ does a wonderful thing to the woman ‘bent over and quite unable to stand up straight for 18 years’ according to the text but this miracle incurs the wrath of the leader of the synagogue. He appeals to the crowd for support of his reprimand of the Lord for healing or working on the Sabbath and not on the other six days when it is permitted. Of course, according to the Judaic Law he is correct but Christ points out his inconsistency with the accusation of hypocrisy since those objecting to his healing would certainly act in a way which is contrary to the law by feeding and watering their animals on the Sabbath. One wonders what are the leader’s real motives in condemning the Lord: jealousy, fear and wanting to protect his territory, self-interest, spiritual pride, some or all of these? What is interesting is how the light of Christ’s presence and his actions expose the darkness within the leader while the crowd look on and in purity of heart simply praise God for the miracle which has taken place. No obvious self-interest here.

This contrast of the written law and the freedom of God’s love are contrasted elsewhere, most notably perhaps in the story of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite are allegedly following the Law since he is untouchable if he is dead and may contaminate them ritually and physically if they stop to help. But this does not deter the Samaritan, a race from the north with whom the Jews have no dealings, who shows simple love and compassion for a fellow human being. We too often fall back on the crutches of the law because we are afraid to step out into the unknown territory of practical love. Sometimes we have to break the rules in order to go beyond the rules into the freedom of the Kingdom. Some years ago a young Nigerian came to me and asked me to hear his confession. He had been in an area of work where casual sex was common and he felt tarnished by it all and guilty. He made a very frank confession with tears and at the end I thought “What shall I do now, since he is not Orthodox?” My heart said that I should not withhold the prayer of absolution despite this and that is what I did. Later I asked Metropolitan Anthony about this kind of situation and he confirmed that I had done what he would have done, though many would not have done the same.

At another time I had problems with the dictates of an Orthodox bishop who frankly banned priests in this country from praying for anyone except the Orthodox – no prayers for family, parents, friends, the sick, the troubled and the dead. All correct on a strict basis but in a country where Orthodox are in a minority, how sad, how dark in the sense of being so far from the light of Christ’s love in the healing of today’s gospel. Frankly, I could not follow this directive nor could many of my fellow priests as I discovered later.

“The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath” is the advice given by the Lord. The purpose of fasting is to draw closer to God and to that end, not only do we need to deepen our prayer life and read the scriptures more often but we need the experience of being exposed like the leader of the synagogue to our own heartless and misguided selves in the light of Christ’s love for the world. The humbling of the self leads to genuine repentance and change, which is the purpose of the Fast. The current events in world history offer us much to pray for, just to mention a few: wars in the Middle East and in Ukraine, starvation in different continents, abusive dictatorial regimes more than ever before according to what the media tell us, ecological crimes against the world which God created for us to enjoy, and waves of overseas migrants forced out of their own lands often to countries which may not want them or cannot support them.

The Advent Fast ends two weeks tomorrow when we celebrate the entry of God into the world which He created in the form of a young child. Let us use the time and our fasting, as little or as great as it may be to see where, with his guidance, we can help not only those in other countries but those who we come across in our daily lives. Some weeks ago I mentioned the practice of St John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria, who set about helping the thousands of poor and homeless in the city on his appointment and did not desist even when he knew he was being cheated by those who did not fall into those categories. Let us not be put off even when we may be cheated or scammed but remain committed to showing love to the world where we can and pray for that same compassion which Christ showed for the crippled woman, the widow of Nain and doubtless for the thousands of sick and infirm that he met in his earthly ministry.

***Oxford, 10th December 2023***