

13.7.2014
HC C/H

LEV. 25:8-22
LUKE 7:36-50

SET FREE TO GIVE

Debt can be like a millstone around the neck. Someone I know found it so hard to use her money well and so easy to get into debt that she used to give her money to the Vicar (it wasn't me!) and he would pay her bills and give her an allowance to stop her spending it all.

Getting into debt can happen to the well-off who earn good money as well as the poor who just struggle to make ends meet. It can happen because people aren't careful and it can happen for unexpected circumstances that no one could predict. It can take years of living off beans on toast and saving the pennies to be free of the weight of it.

But there are other ways to be weighed down: by guilt or attitudes that cause harm or hurt.

Both our scripture passages today speak about the release of what binds people and a freedom from debts. Both are also, first and foremost, about a relationship with God.

First from the laws of leviiticus. There's a new community with Moses. They need some rules but behind the rules is common sense based on the relationship which God wants them to know.

So as well as people needing a Sabbath rest one day in every seven, here the land is meant to have a rest one year in every seven- a sabbath rest for fields! And don't worry about what you'll eat: God will provide enough in the year before. Then every 50th year there is to be a jubilee when everything that has been bound up gets released and we all go back to square one and everyone being equal to start again. This is the idea:

Over time, things have worked out badly for some people. They've had to sell their own family land or property and some people have become

slaves because they had no other way to make a living. But others have had good fortune and they've accumulated land and property and slaves. Things and people have got bound up with others. In the Jubilee year it's like a big party where everyone gets back to how it was before instead of getting higher up or lower down the ladder. Land and property is given back or sold (but for a fair price based on how many years it can produce crops) and slaves can go. Just like that.

Release it all. Release the houses and fields. Release the people. Get back to equality. What?! Why? Because God released you from slavery. Don't forget that – it wasn't your fault but you were stuck until God set you free. So now, however hard you worked for those fields, or those slaves, let them go. You mustn't stock up whilst others haven't enough. Remember, they weren't yours to start with anyway, but mine, says God.

It's about relating to God and seeing what kind of God he is and being the same.

[Can't we see the sense in it today? Intensive farming methods and no rest for the fields mean the land won't produce without fertilisers or chemicals; workers who don't get their Sabbath are over-stretched; even the 'bedroom tax' -although people are up in arms about how it's being proposed and worked out- was an intention to even things out by saying some people have got loads of empty space in their homes whilst others haven't even got a one room flat to live in; and our own parish share system is meant to say that in our dioceses, there can be fair shares on the basis of what each parish can afford, to help pay for mission across the board]

It's all about seeing that God releases people from what binds them up.

So we turn to Luke 7 where it's not about land or property or slavery but morals. Here's a righteous man and an immoral woman. He is a known religious leader. She is a known prostitute. He spends his life trying to keep the law, be good and tell others to do the same. She, apparently, has got it wrong by one of the greatest sins in the book.

But Jesus accepts her. Why? Because even people who mess things up may want to be different and find it hard to change; even people who do things that harm others may also harm themselves and deserve help not complete condemnation; even those who go wrong may feel the weight of it all and want to be free.

Somehow the woman knows that with Jesus she *can* be free. The bad stuff will not weigh her down for her whole life. She knows the size of her debt. She's not ignorant about that. Everywhere she looks she'll be reminded. So when Jesus accepts her, just as she is, no wonder there are tears of relief and love and thanks. She is somehow free.

For Simon, it's a different tale. Either he is genuinely a man without much in the way of sin, or at least he doesn't *think* he's a sinner. He's certainly not troubled by it. One way or the other he doesn't relate to Jesus with a thankful heart for his own forgiveness, or ready to set anyone else free, with any kind of love or compassion or sympathy. He will go on trying to tick the boxes about right behaviour. As he does that he will go on missing the point of God's grace which says it's all about a relationship with that God who sets people free and releases them from debts, from guilt, from being bound up. It's about being generous because you realise God has been generous with you.

Today is our Promise Sunday. If we think about ourselves, some of us will have possessions, others not. Some will feel guilt, others not.

The Bible tells us not to accumulate possessions at the expense of others; it tells us to give out to others and help set them free. To make a Jubilee.

But to give out- be it in terms of money or time or effort or acceptance- needs us to see and know the God who gives and forgives and accepts us. Sometimes we're like Simon- sure we're trying hard but actually grinding away at doing it all by ourselves, instead of coming to Jesus.

But if we know and love Jesus Christ and see what kind of God he is,

then we will give:

- because what we have is his to start with anyway
- because God wants equality
- because he wants to set others free by generous relationships

So please look at the questions in the 'Questions and Promises' sheets and think hard about them.

In St Matthew's over the last year our income fell by around £12,000. Regular donations by envelopes, fundraising efforts, gift day income, donations – all went down.

Not only that but there has been a very reduced calendar of events for getting together socially – that affects our fellowship and relationships with each other.

So we have had less in money and less in relationships, even though our ministry to the village has the same kinds of needs it had the year before.

We are not in a good place for those reasons. I ask you to promise to give, on the basis of knowing the God we can trust who wants to set us free. Remember, when God said people should rest, give back what they had worked for and set people free, it was not even just for the benefit of the slaves themselves or the poor. It was also so they could all live well in their land.

We have a God who releases what is bound up. He asks us to do the same and to trust him to give to us all we need whenever we do it.