

Reading: Luke 13:10-17

Ever present God, open the meaning of Bible to us in a fresh and exciting way. In Jesus name.

Recently a company in the States has begun to develop sound barrier breaking passenger planes again. The nickname for the plane is "Boom". One of my most enthusiastic parishioners was a man who had worked on the Concorde. As a young Englishman he had had a lot to do with making the engines powerful enough to bring the plane to supersonic speed. The Concorde was famous for being the first passenger plane to break the sound barrier. I asked him one day if it was difficult to get the engines to break the sound barrier. "Oh, that was easy," he said, "it was working with the French that was difficult."

Today we hear the account of an encounter between Jesus and a crippled woman. What is most remarkable is how Jesus, like the Concorde, breaks so many barriers. It's easy for us to hear this story and miss all the barriers that Jesus breaks. I counted four. You might think of others.

Firstly, he sees her. In the crowded synagogue there would have been lots of people milling around. She had been crippled for 18 years so she was just a part of the furniture, just a part of the crowd. But Jesus sees her. He makes a choice to really notice her. He does this time and time again in the Gospels - like when he sees the poor widow in the temple. Jesus notices the poor and the vulnerable. That's the first barrier.

Secondly, he calls out to her. Men, especially respected rabbis, were not allowed to talk to women in public places. Jesus breaks this barrier down again and again too. Perhaps the most notorious example is when he talks at length to the woman at the well. Only a woman's father or husband spoke to her, and then that only happened at home or when they were with other women. Jesus breaks the barrier of gender.

Thirdly, he lays his hands on her to pray for healing. Again, a man was not meant to touch a woman, especially not in public.

The last barrier he breaks is the last straw for the leader of the synagogue. Jesus heals on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is for worship and rest. Indignant, the leader tells Jesus off, "There are six other days. Do your healing on one of those." Jesus turns it back on him, "You hypocrite, you would untie your donkey and give it a drink on the Sabbath. How much more ought we to set free this woman, a daughter of Abraham, on this day."

In case you think this sort of extreme Sabbath keeping is dead, a friend of mine hosts Israelis who come to New Zealand. They must have a piece of tape over the light in the fridge, so it doesn't come on the Sabbath.

We feel so much more enlightened than the people of the Gospel. We don't live like this. But I want to suggest that whereas the people of Jesus' day used someone's gender or health or race as a way of excluding them, we use money. The amount of money you have in our society predetermines where you live, your access to education, health, and housing. We have a lot of very subtle cues like the colour of a person's skin, their accent, or their clothing, for knowing just where they fit.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be growing more like him, to look for ways we can break down the barriers that divide. In one of our liturgies, we say of Jesus: "Blessed be the Prince of Peace, who breaks down the barriers that divide."

We don't need to be doing great big things, just little things. It begins with noticing, just like Jesus did: noticing the person who is on the outer of the circle, the one who isn't fitting in, the one at work who others make fun of, the one down the street that others avoid. A small, simple gesture, a smile, a door opened, a wave: such things break down the barriers that divide. And this is how community begins and how community is made.

What would a life lived breaking down barriers look like? Every week Pat Teulon walks to the Anglican City Mission. Pat, aged 93, has clocked in every Thursday for the past 45 years, full of energy and with a great sense of humour. She was born in Wales to a family that taught her everyone deserved equal respect and dignity. In fact, her father was a lay preacher who had kept an open home for the poor. When Pat finished her nurse training, she took a job at the Birmingham parish as a health visitor. It was there that she met her husband, who was the curate at the time. They moved to Hokitika in New Zealand and began a new life. They raised children and kept their home open for street people, the homeless and the hungry. It was a safe haven where nobody left hungry. Pat is just one of the 240 volunteers that keep the City Mission open. Like the Concorde and like Jesus, her life has been one of breaking down the barriers that divide.

Jesus breaks down the barriers that divide.

A very mysterious thing happens as we grapple with today's Gospel. As we contemplate a person bent double and now healed by Jesus, we discover in his teaching and life the power to set ourselves free; free from all that holds us back as a community, free to treat others with equal dignity, free to be the community that we long to be, a community healed from the barriers that divide.