



## Time and place: doing the 'appropriate' thing

Times and places can be tricky combinations. I don't know if you feel the same about yourself, but I often feel myself to be a mix of the conformist and the contrarian. In some roles and places I am pretty orthodox, sticking to rules and conventions. In others I am subversive, contrary and a little awkward, even troublesome. On a good day even a bit prophetic.

Any discomfort I feel is not about being these various things: I can't imagine being alive in this astonishing and troubling world without such a spectrum of responses. Rather, the worry is wondering if I have been the 'right' thing in a particular situation. You might say a question of time and place. I can hear even now a voice from my past bellowing 'this is not the time or the place' at something I had said or done. Perhaps you have had a similar experience.

When our actions or words are judged to be enacted or spoken at the 'wrong' time or in the 'wrong' place they are sometimes described as *inappropriate*. That's a rather oblique, psycho-babbly kind of a way of saying something is mad or bad or plain dumb or even scandalous.

The term 'inappropriate behaviour' has become something of a cliché, certainly in the sphere of human services like counselling and education and social work; and it is to be found aplenty in the lexicon of the church's pastoral work.

I understand, of course, the intention that is very often behind that phrase and the kind of behaviour described by it. We weave our sometimes unsteady way through the labyrinthine conventions and complexities of our lives as best we can, alongside other carbon-based bipeds, and it's not an altogether easy business: we need a certain number of agreed scripts and codes of conduct to make the world tick, to lubricate the business of daily encounters.

We need 'appropriate' ways of dealing with one another. Courtesy and politeness indicate a necessary respect for others; not spitting in company for example, not jumping the queue, not helping ourselves to someone else's lunch. I am no advocate of disrespectful, disdainful behaviour. Yet as with many things we humans get involved with, we can drift too far in one direction or another.

Church life often adopts an unspoken but strong message along the lines of

‘this is not the time or the place’. If you are regular here and feel part of our communal life you might disagree with me, since we do seem here at St James’s to have a reasonable level of ‘inappropriate behaviour’ in one way or another. And (on the whole) very welcome it is! But church life more generally and especially in the liturgical churches seems to be heavy on the unspoken rules of behaviour, rules that have sometimes evolved as a contradiction of the message the place says it proclaims.

Luke (today’s Gospel) has something to say about this. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when he sees a woman with a crippled, bent back. He called her over and said, “...you are set free from your ailment.” Immediately she stood up straight – for the first time, we are told, in 18 years - and she praised God. You can feel the joy, the astonishment.

You’d think that everyone else there would feel the same. But the leader of the synagogue, jumps up and says ‘no, no, no: this kind of thing should not happen on the Sabbath – it is bad form, it’s *inappropriate*’. Luke adds that the leader is indignant and keeps saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

I have just a little sympathy here. I know how the desire for order and ‘good taste’

can take hold of clergy. It’s a decent enough impulse. We don’t want to frighten the horses, or alarm polite society or provoke a complaint to the bishop. Very often we want ‘liturgy’ to work well (though that raises the interesting question of what ‘working well’ in this context might mean).

Luke isn’t much taken with such concerns. He says that “... the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water [or do your weekly shop at Waitrose or Lidl]? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham (a human person just like you) .....be set free from this suffering on the Sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”

There is a warning here about the kind of notions of purity that creep up on traditionally religious people. And not just religious people. No, not at all. We’d better often remind one another – tenderly is best – that ideas about what we regard as proper and appropriate can get muddled.

We can become more interested in ‘right’ behaviour rather than truthful and authentic and necessary behaviour. Organisations of all and every kind display this pressure and for many of us Conformity is our middle name. It’s not

just the church - though the church has to be especially alert because of the outrageously liberating and counter-cultural claims it must never forget itself to be steward of. Like, for example, that God seeks our individual healing and liberation from the many demons we not only suffer from but (it often seems) studiously solicit and collect: demons like hardness of heart, the wrong kinds of ambition, the dangerous kinds of wealth, the distorting kinds of power and standing.

If I were a betting man I'd wager that I'm not the only person here who identifies with the woman, feeling often crippled and bent double. Crippled by the demon of fear, by my compromises and conformities, by the kind of person I know myself to be. I need healing from all sorts of things which keep me bent double and keep me from knowing the promises of God spoken of in the Gospel.

If that is true for you also, then we want our healing to take place on the

Sabbath, indeed anytime, so long as it reaches us. In fact we want it to happen *now* (please), with haste, and we don't care where it occurs: in the sanctuaries of our religious institutions or in places far removed from these sometimes sanitised sanctuaries where (it may seem) all manner of 'proper' and 'appropriate' behaviour is permitted but not the raw, unprocessed and not infrequently anguished material of our lived lives. (What kind of sanctuary is *that*?)

There is a way of being both a Sabbath-keeper and a Sabbath-breaker. Treat every day as holy, permitting (and requiring) both rest *and* work; requiring that we attend to God *and* to the world; requiring that we always seek for ourselves and one another the healing of our bent and crippled selves, the sooner to stand upright and to sing praises to God. Amen

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