

St James's Piccadilly  
10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
21 August 2022  
Ayla Lepine

READINGS  
**Hebrews 12.18-end**

**Luke 13.10-17**

Eighteen years is a long time. Take a moment to think about what your life was like in 2004. Maybe you were living on the other side of the world, or you'd just had a child, or you were searching for work. Maybe a relationship that you are no longer in was an important part of your life. Maybe you were searching for a place to call home and now you find yourself here. Maybe it was the best year of your life. Maybe you just don't remember much about it.

I was 22, working with the Archbishops' Council's Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns. Rose Hudson-Wilkin, now the Bishop of Dover, was chair of the committee. Sonia Barron, who is now one of the Church of England's Racial Justice Commissioners, was my boss. My learning curve was steep. I realise now that I made so many mistakes, and I loved what I was doing but so often I really didn't have a clue, and was grateful for my colleagues' patience! I was constantly being shown just how institutionally racist the Church has been, was then, and tragically still is. The things I learned became, though I didn't know it at the time, a very important part of my life now. They're part of my beliefs about God and the Church longing for justice and maybe, if we dare, taking steps of anti-racism and reparations to bring about that justice together.

Those 18 years, a long span of time between then and now, is the time the Gospel gives us to measure the incomprehensible pain and marginalisation of the woman Jesus meets. Time can heal, but it can also drag on, especially for those whose experiences are chronic or uncertain. Think of what may have felt like never-ending wandering for the Israelites in the wilderness, protected and loved by God, but exhausted and bewildered. Think of people living in refugee camps, wondering if this will stretch on ahead of them for another two decades, or maybe longer.

I think too of people who are locked in conflict in the Holy Land. Every year since 2015, there has been an initiative called the Big Ride for Palestine. The concept is simple – hundreds of UK folks, united by their love of cycling and their yearning for justice in the Holy Land, take to their bicycles for charity and activism.

In 2021 they rode 22 miles corresponding to distance a cyclist can go in Gaza, and 512 reflecting the number of children killed in the 2014 bombardment. The length of the challenge was 51 days - the length of the 2014 bombardment.

Noor Thabet is this annual event's ambassador. She and the team have raised £80 000 to help build playgrounds for children in Gaza. If you'd like to learn more about Noor, she's featured on a recent episode of the Amos Trust's podcast series, We Do Hope.

These initiatives are the kind of action that can spring up from an individual and even from a whole people being 'bent over, and unable to stand up straight' like the woman in today's Gospel. There is always the possibility, somehow, somewhere, that the ones in this world who most urgently need to stand up straight – who may have been born into a situation of perpetual damage and marginalisation – can and will stand up. And stay standing. And help others to stand, too.

Here at St James's, next Wednesday evening, the Iranian artist Iman Tajik will launch our new EMBARK festival with a talk about his work, a Q&A, and a reception too. Everyone is welcome, and it's a pay what you feel event. His practice focuses on bridging the gap between art and activism, and between those difficult spaces of self and other. His work inspires empathy and reflection on what crossing borders is really like. Refugee and asylum seeker support is a vital part of our church's mission and character. Wonderful folks volunteer to help this community – the International Group – alongside Jo Gowers. If you haven't seen the film about this group on St James's YouTube channel, I warmly recommend it. Iman Tajik, who's based in Scotland, is going to step into this church as the artist in residence for the EMBARK festival of music and art, which highlights what migration and crossing borders really means for so many people – those we know, and those we'll never meet. Many are trying to stand up straight, and many succeed.

One of Tajik's works of art, called 'Where the Body Meets the Land', is on the EMBARK flyer. It's a glittering flag. This flag is not the flash of luxury metallic lame flowing in the wind. It is an emergency blanket. These are given to people whose relationships to the flags of their home countries have become ambivalent at best. They may yearn to go home one day, even as they touch down on the beach in another country that may or may not welcome them. Flying the emergency flag is a bold statement as much as it is defiant. Does the emergency blanket, providing warmth temporarily at a threshold between perilous sea and uncertain land, represent hope on a borderland between past and future?

The flag is not just planted in the ground and left there. Tajik erected this emergency flag on a beach in Scotland, and began to walk. He created an indented space – literally a line in the sand – by pacing between the shore and the flag. This process refers to the thousands of refugees and migrants that have disembarked, including those that did not survive, onto UK shores.

The emergency blanket makes a connection between politics and earth justice, too. It is a shimmering temporary symbol not only for those who have experienced forced displacement, but also those to be displaced due to climate change. And these conflicts are not separate either, but always intertwined. Tajik also wants us to see how the emergency blanket flag is a tool to critique nationalism. No doubt when he comes here to speak on Wednesday, there will be an opportunity to hear him discuss these themes, and to ask him about it too. The EMBARK festival can take our Gospel reading today and connect it to the present. As we gather to enjoy the music, listen to the performers, and experience new

perspectives, and have a glass of wine and enjoy ourselves – this is, after all, meant to be a fun celebration too! – we can make connections between what happens here on a Sunday morning, what happens here during the week, and what keeps happening in ways big and small, hopeful and terrible, in our world every moment of the day.

Because St James's Creative Director Richard Parry and our Events and Concerts Producer Didier Rochard have created this festival, open to the world – and the congregation get 20% off on all the tickets, too! – we can encourage people who wouldn't usually come here on a Sunday morning to reflect, in their own way, on the themes that we as a church are always focusing on. We can participate in a way that, we hope, can change the world for the better. We are here, every day and not just on a Sunday, to imagine a better future, and figure out, moment by moment, together, how to work towards what we're imagining, with God's help.

In the Gospel, Jesus places this woman, who has been defined by her pain for decades, in the centre of the space where religious teaching and prayer take place. He calls her a 'daughter of Abraham' – a child of God, a sister among those who are gathered in that space for worship and for study. Jesus shows that the sabbath – a day when no work should be done – is a day not to refrain from justice and love, but to commit to it in unexpected and radical ways. The sabbath is the time for compassion and mercy. It's the time to walk alongside people – women especially, as this Gospel shows us – who have experienced suffering beyond belief, and be present in a way that demonstrates their true dignity. Jesus affirms her stature, as she stands up straight, as God's daughter. Jesus, as the Son of God, brings her directly into his family.

At the Eucharist and whenever we pray to the God of Creation who made all things as good and holy gifts because of love, and nothing more or less, it is a prayer in which every person may stand tall. Every person is a member of God's family, just as we are, without having to earn our place at the table.

I also want to be clear here that standing tall is a phrase I'm connecting with the Gospel and the sense of dignity that every person deserves in this life, because that dignity is a God-given gift and right. It is not in any way meant as an expectation placed as an additional social burden upon those who are unable to stand physically. Jesus does not heal the woman because she is inherently damaged by her physical experience and therefore needs to stand in order to be a whole and beloved person. He invites her to stand tall as a way of showing her and everyone around her that liberation from pain and exile takes many forms.

Henri Nouwen lived and worked in a L'Arche community alongside people with different kinds of disabilities. In his book *Adam: God's Beloved* he describes a friendship with one of the community's residents whose love and life was a gift too, as well as a foundational and simple truth. Nouwen explained:

he was a person, who by his very life announced the marvellous mystery of our God: I am precious, beloved, whole, and born of God. Adam bore silent witness to this mystery, which has nothing to do with whether or not he could speak, walk, or express himself, whether or not he made money, had a job, was fashionable,

famous, married or single. It had to do with his being. He was and is a beloved child of God.<sup>30</sup>

It is simply in being alive that he was – and all people are – loved. The woman in the Gospel is a child of God, and so are you, and so are we. I'm so curious about this woman. Perhaps you are too. What did she do after this event in the synagogue? How did she spend the next eighteen years of her life? Like many people in the Gospels we have no idea. But we do hear in the text that her experience inspired the people around her to be amazed and to realise something they may not have understood before about God and about themselves. That's a sign of hope. Amen.