

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As a teenager, I had the pleasure of many summer holidays in Scotland. From the age of 8 upwards, each year mum and dad would take us up to the North West Coast, or out to the Islands. Despite, the wind, rain and midgies, we would go out each day from the home where we were staying; spend a fortnight – walking in the hills or along the stunning golden beaches.

My very first trip to Scotland was to the Isle of Skye, with all the excitement of the overnight journey and ferry crossing. We stayed in Portree, with a lovely family, who provided bed, breakfast and evening meal.

It was during this holiday, that I became aware of one of the differences between England and Scotland. Out on the Western Islands, in particular, there was a very strict observance of Sunday, as a day of rest, and of attending the Kirk. On Sundays, the family we were staying with, would not provide an evening meal. During our journey home, we discovered even in the City of Inverness, that the public toilets were not opened on a Sunday. It is only in relatively recent times, that the ferries to the outer Islands have been allowed to travel on a Sunday.

How does all of this relate to our service today?

In many ways, our readings follow on from the theme of last week's service. "The Gospel of Jesus will make you feel uncomfortable."

In the Gospel today, we hear about Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath Day. This made the religious leaders of his time feel very uncomfortable. Not only that – they were extremely angry and reminded the crowd of the Old Testament rules concerning the observance of the Sabbath Day. It was forbidden under Jewish Law to do any kind of work on the Sabbath.

As in the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis – God created the heavens and earth in 6 days, and on the 7th day he rested.

In our reading this morning from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we read:-

"If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs, then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth."

The Sabbath day then, was sacrosanct. It was to be kept holy. No work of any kind was to be done. It was a day for worship and focusing on God and his teaching.

Against this background, it is easy to see why the leader of the synagogue was so indignant at Jesus' actions.

Jesus had performed a work of healing on the Sabbath Day.

However, it was not about serving his own interests, or pursuing his own affairs. Jesus' act of healing was about reaching out in love and compassion to someone who had been crippled by her condition for 18 years.

Jesus wasn't flouting the religious rules, or trampling the Sabbath for the sake of it – he saw a very real need in someone who had suffered so much; his heart was moved to act, and he reached out in love to heal. How could anyone object to that?

When criticised for what he had done, Jesus drew an analogy to the care and concern that would be offered to an ox or donkey in need of a drink on the Sabbath Day. Surely, healing someone who has been sick for 18 years is just as appropriate or acceptable?

Here, as elsewhere in the Gospel accounts we see Jesus challenging the interpretation of the religious leaders, and his desire to help us to see things from a different perspective.

At no point does Jesus deny the importance of the law. In fact, he says that he has not come to take any letter away from the Law.

What Jesus does, is help us to see the Law in a wider context – he helps us to see the purpose of the Law. What matters is not a blind observance of the Law, but the spirit of the Law.

Jewish traditions and Laws, handed down through the prophets and from one generation to another, were about helping people to draw close to God, to seek and to do his will, and to know his presence with them.

However, very sadly over time, the Law itself had become a burden and often got in the way of God's love touching people's lives.

Going back to my teenage holidays in Scotland, it was during that time that I developed my interest in photography. As you will know, when you take a picture with a camera, you can either take a wide angle view (which is great for capturing vast landscapes), or you can use a zoom lens to focus in on one particular detail (such as a stag standing proudly against the skyline, or the tower of a castle).

The religious leaders of Jesus day had focused in on the detail of the Law. As a result, they missed out on the bigger picture - their rigid application of the letter of the Law got in the way of God's love.

The teaching and actions of Jesus, help us to shift our focus – to see things from a wider angle, and gain a better understanding of the things that are truly important in life.

For Jesus, the healing of the women who had been sick for 18 years, was far more important than a blind observance of the Sabbath Day regulations.

As we reflect on these readings today, let us pray that God will help us to see things in our own lives from the wider perspective, so that we can focus on the things that really matter. This is something that impacts not only on us individually, but also as a church and as a community and as a nation.

As a Church, may God help us to see any barriers that we might put in the way of others coming to know and share in his love.

As a Community, may we have a focus which allows us to see the needs of individuals and enables us to reach out with the same love and compassion that Jesus showed.

As a nation, I pray that our leaders at every level of government will make decisions and set policies which see beyond economic convenience or political expedience to the impact they will have on the lives of those who are most vulnerable in society.

As the focus of the media's cameras shift away from Rio at the end of the Olympic Games, I pray that as a world community we may not lose sight of global issues affecting us all, and work together to build a safer and more peaceful world.

Above all, may God's Spirit enable each one of us to focus on the things that are truly important in our lives, so that our lives may reflect his love in word and action.

Amen.

