

A Good Sabbath

[Luke 13 : 10 -17]



Neriah sat in his usual place, just behind the teacher, among the other officials and the Rabbi. For once he wished he was not in his place. He felt as though everyone in the synagogue was looking at him, though in fact not one had even a passing interest in him this morning. He wriggled on his seat and wiped the back of his neck with his hand. It was humid weather and so stuffy. It looked as though the whole village had crammed into his synagogue this morning. He had never seen such a large gathering. The thought that he could never draw a crowd half this size for Sabbath worship made him writhe even more. He looked around the congregation. The heat was not bothering them. They were wide awake and following the Nazarene's every word. There was no denying that he spoke with a compelling authority. His eyes held you. What he said was interesting, down-to earth, and sometime humorous. That too had annoyed Neriah. Laughing in synagogue was something he frowned on and was sure the Almighty would send retribution. He cringed in anticipation of wrathful thunder clap. All he heard was a spontaneous hand clap from Eli, which he could do nothing to stop. Neriah continued to fume. Everything was wrong this morning. If only the Nazareth Rabbi would stay still. It was not done to leave the desk while you preached. He would have a word about that afterwards.

However, it was something quite different which brought him to his feet in angry and indignant outburst. He had been temporarily relieved when the teacher came to the end of his address and the congregation moved en masse, discovering the cramps which had gone unnoticed while they listened.

Neriah waited for the preacher to sit down after which he would lead the prayers, but Jesus did not sit down. He walked between the front two rows, and towards the women who listened behind their screen. Neriah stood up, not sure what to do in these unusual circumstances. His bright red face accentuated his fine weasel-like features. Now Jesus was speaking. He repeated words he had spoken in his teaching, about being whole for God, and how crippled minds could make sick bodies and bent bodies make twisted minds which opened the door of our hearts to the devil's work. Then he looked through the screen and said quietly, 'Hannah! Woman, you are free from your illness.' A strange silence fell over the synagogue. Neriah watched as closely as every other turned head there.

Most people knew whom Jesus was talking to. Hannah had been bent double for years. It had not been noticeable at first, but as the disease gripped her, her whole body twisted till it seemed at times her head would touch the ground. It was a long time since this elderly woman had looked at the sun. Once she had been so lively, a neighbour whom everyone respected and loved and counted on for help. She was always there for anyone in need. But as often happens, with time people soon forget - even those close to you. Through the years some people came to believe Hannah was in the grip of some evil spirit, which held her in its vice-like grip. Why else would nothing cure her? Villagers avoided her. Children made fun as she hobbled through the village, swaying from side to side as she dragged herself along. When Hannah's boys left home she and her daughter moved to a small dwelling on the edge of the village. With few people now to speak to, understandably she became embittered and resentful. The light went from her eyes, but her courage and determination never left her. Hannah was not often seen in the synagogue. This morning, she sat with the women, but slightly apart at the end of the screen. Most of the other women were polite, but not enough to sit beside her. Neriah had noticed Hannah and wondered if she really should have been admitted.

When Jesus addressed Hannah there was absolute silence in the synagogue. Everyone had turned. Hannah, still bent double, came head first from the end of the screen. A barely audible gasp swept round the house of worship as Jesus touched her, putting his hands gently on her shoulders. Very slowly, she straightened herself, as though from a terrible stiffness. In a while she stood completely straight, and with an other world smile looked at Jesus, mouthing the words 'thank you.'

The silence broke. Everyone was talking. Some people got up and went over to see for themselves. Then someone shouted 'God be praised ! It's a miracle.' But before others could take up the cry a voice spoke loud. Neriah was on his feet. 'No!' He screamed. 'It's wrong. The law doesn't allow healing on the Sabbath!' A new kind of silence fell over the synagogue - a questioning, incredulous stillness.

Immediately, Jesus strode back to where Neriah was standing, his face purple with rage. Jesus spoke quietly. Many would not have heard him address the official. 'Neriah, you are being a hypocrite. You know you don't let your ox, or your donkey go without water on the Sabbath. Are you saying we should be kinder to our animals than to this woman who has been crippled in body and spirit for so many years. You never forget your donkey. What have you done for Hannah six days a week all through these years?'

Neriah had no answer. He almost ran from the synagogue, with the other officials and the Rabbi close on his heels. At the door he stopped and turned with his cronies crowding into him. 'It's wrong !' he shouted again. 'You haven't heard the last of this !' He raged on but his words were lost in the increasing crescendo of praise from the crowd.

Hannah walked from the synagogue with her daughters arm around her and thronged now by a crowd of women. Later she would explain how she had felt compelled to attend worship that morning, yet with no thought of asking for Jesus' help. His words, however had spoken to her of the bigger healing she needed, opening her mind to see the person she had become. So much had happened in such a short space of time. She blinked as she looked up at the sun. 'I am so sad for Neriah and his crowd,' she said. 'Can't he see? A miracle from God and all Neriah wants is rules and what's right in the synagogue. In a way he's more bent than I ever was.' She smiled again and an incredible beauty was in her face. 'What a glorious day it is,' she said, 'A truly good Sabbath. What more holy thing could you want than what Jesus did for me?' And several of her companions responded, 'Praise God.'