

## Lk.13:10-17

Dean and Maxine live in Middlesbrough. He is a skinhead with tattoos, broken teeth, two Stafford bull terriers and no job. She first got pregnant at 17, and sits with her daughter – dummy in mouth – in front of the television all day. She's overweight and finds it difficult to hoist herself off the settee. Both have lived off the tax payer for years. They are the kind of people who as the former Chancellor George Osborne once famously said, have their curtains closed when their hard-working neighbours are setting off to work.

So far, so easy to judge. But then one day, a few years ago now, Dean and Maxine were visited by Channel 4 reality TV show, and made its stars for the week. Oh no, you might think, this situation can only get worse with reality TV. But wait. The show was 'The Fairy Jobmother' – compared by the *Times* to 'Supernanny for the long terms jobless'. Supernanny, as you might well remember, involved the wonderful Jo Frost staying with families and showing them how they might tackle difficulties with raising their children. The Fairy Jobmother showed a similar process – someone getting close to the long term unemployed and helping them tackle what's gone wrong. And here, again according to *The Times*, is what getting close to Dean and Maxine meant:

*'Suddenly the couple didn't seem like bogeymen anymore. Maxine has nothing but a half tin of spaghetti hoops in the fridge, she is overwhelmed by debt, and doesn't know if the family get £261 a week or a month in benefits. 'It does my head in' she says. The 22 year old is terrified by the thought of a job interview, never having been taught how to shake hands, or say 'good morning' rather than 'hiya' or to hold eye contact. But she laps up every piece of advice and bursts into tears when the Fairy Jobmother tells her she is gorgeous. No-one has ever given her this much tuition or attention.'*

The lesson, it seems, was this: at least some of the problem with long-term unemployment, with the huge benefit bill and the depressing dependency culture is **not** to do with jobs not being there, and **not** to do with people being lazy or cheats. It is to do, in part, with people having such poor skills, such poor self-esteem, being so overwhelmed and unprepared for life, that doing anything other than rotting on the dole seems, simply, out of reach. You might not think it should be, you might find it difficult to comprehend, but at least for some people *it simply is*.

Why is this part of a sermon? Because the Gospel reading today is telling us that part of being the Church, the people around Jesus, is to be a place where that does not happen – where people are not left behind, left to rot. 'He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath' – and at the back, barely daring to show her face, there is a woman, and a crippled woman at that, crippled for eighteen years. Two things then, being female and being sick, which in that society told her she was worth nothing – which bent her down as crushingly as any problem with her spine did. And Jesus calls her out to the front of the synagogue – in from the edges, to the heart of things, with the respectable folk, where she belongs – and says: 'stand up straight, O daughter of Abraham'. Daughter of Abraham – not someone useless, not someone disposable, but one of the People of God. Jesus gives that woman her dignity back: he makes her stand up straight in every sense.

And what he did for one woman back then, our faith is he will do for all people, in all times and places. All of us, in our different ways will be bent over, crushed down. Even those of us look the most shiny and impressive, the ones most unlike Dean and Maxine, even those will have their moments. Even those will have the darker crannies of their lives, where things are desperate, where shame and failure and defeat lie. Even those who manage to hide those things from others. and perhaps even from themselves, even they will one day die – the ultimate being bent over, crushed down, in our common human futility. And to them all, to us all, even beyond the grave Jesus will stay: stand up straight. Stand up straight daughter of Abraham, stand up straight son of Abraham. That's what his death and resurrection were all about: going into the heart of human ruin to build us all back up again.

One day, He will make us all stand up straight. It will be glorious, it will be wonderful. And for now, our calling is to just to point towards it, just to begin, in the tiniest ways, to show the world what it has coming. The community of Jesus needs to be the place where people get their dignity, where people get to stand up straight, where no-one, no-one, ever feels like Maxine. Where no-one has to wait for a television presenter to tell them they are worthwhile and precious.

What this means in practice is going to differ from place to place. In my old job as a university Chaplain, one of the challenges is to get students to believe that they are not the same thing as their exam results – that they are worthwhile and loved even if they don't succeed. In my curacy, it was to make sure that two small boys in a local primary school had clean clothes to go to school in and weren't mocked for smelling. In Abbots, you'll know who the people are who are cringing at the back, bent over, waiting for someone to help them stand up. Their faces and their particular stories, will always be different but our job is the same: how do we tell people that they are not rubbish. That whatever they think of themselves, whatever the world tells them they should think of themselves, that they are the beloved sons and daughters of God and they get to stand up straight.

And we will not communicate this just by telling them – just by putting it out there as a theoretical proposition to be believed or rejected. We will only communicate it by embodying it: by real, practical, building up of people. In other words, by being a church where we visit each other. Where the lonely are not left that way, and where the broken-hearted are comforted. Where we help with each other's debts, where we make sure each of us has the basics. Where we take seriously what people might be able to do for us, and not just view them as objects to be helped. This should be a place where people walk in and think – my goodness, everybody here is helping everybody else stand up straight. If we built a church like that, we would never have to worry about our numbers again.