

peace with God and to work together to bring the kingdom of God to the world. Jesus believed that even fallible human beings could shape a religion which would work. And although Richard Dawkins can find plenty of people for whom religion has not worked, there are plenty more for whom it has. I mean, why are you all here today? Somebody somewhere must have helped you and encouraged you and taught you so that you made up your mind to be in this Christian church today. And you trusted that at some point in your being here you would be helped to get closer to God.

The challenge then is how we keep religion as what it should be? How we prevent it from becoming a man-made burden rather than a God-given gift? Jake's parents have brought him here for baptism because they know that if a child is to grow up with any kind of faith, he –and they-will need the backing of a Christian community. How can we ensure that Christian upbringing becomes a blessing to Jake, not an imposition?
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Our first reading told us how, several hundred years before Jesus, a man called Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet. Prophets had an official status within that society. They worked partly with the priests, in the religious life of the country and partly with the Government. They were like, “the conscience” the church and the state, appointed to keep in touch with God and bring his words to the people. And the impression you get from God's first conversation with Jeremiah, is that Jeremiah is not being called to keep things going the way they have always been done. He is told to “uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant.” Not purely for the sake of making trouble but because his society was changing. It had become fragmented after a series of weak and corrupt leaders. It was threatened by super-powers. People were frightened and insecure. And the priests were doing and saying nothing other than what they had always said and done.

Jeremiah found that he could not, in all conscience simply attend royal garden parties in his official capacity and say “my loyal respects to your Majesty.” Nor could he go into the temple and preach from the pulpit “be at peace. You are alright. God is on your side and that is all that matters.” He could not “toe the party line.” He had to stir things up. He had to warn people of impending trouble. He had to speak to them in the light of what was going on right now in their world and in their lives. And although the political leaders hated him and the religious leaders hated him, the people clung to him, especially when calamity did fall on their nation because then, even in their trauma he could talk to them of God in ways which made sense.

Jesus did not heal that woman on the Sabbath day just because he thought it would be fun to shock a few religious fuddy-duddies. It was all part of a much bigger message: that for religion to do what it was intended to do: bring people closer to God: it must take account of their needs, of their situation. It must help them to grow, not hold them back; it must keep them moving, not root them to the ground. It must be constantly developing, re-shaping, re-inventing itself because it is about life and life is never static. In lifting the burden of pain and disability from that woman's shoulders on the Sabbath day, Jesus was symbolically lifting the burden which religion had become from many people's shoulders.

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When I was a child in the Plymouth Brethren, their Sunday morning service was rather like a Quaker service: the people sat in a circle and spent long periods of time

in silence, with only an occasional hymn or prayer or reading. My parents agreed that, when we were young, they would take it in turns to attend this Morning Meeting and the other would stay at home to look after the children.

One Sunday it was my mother's turn to go and my brother Tim, who was about six years old, asked if he could go with her. Now mother knew, as did everybody else acquainted with our family, that Tim was fundamentally incapable of sitting still for more than two seconds at a time but hope springs eternal, as they say, so she took him with her. Well, Tim barely lasted his usual two seconds before starting to fidget, wriggle around, whisper to mother when would it be time to go home and did she have any sweets in her handbag. As they finally walked out Mum said, "*I'm not taking you again, Tim. I knew you wouldn't like it and when you are so restless, I don't enjoy the service.*"

Two weeks' later it was her turn to go again and Tim begged to be allowed a second chance. He would be good. He promised he would be good. He would sit still and he would be quiet. Mother did not have the energy to argue so she took him again. And this time, miraculously, he did sit still. He was so quiet that mother began to wonder if he was sickening for something. Then in the heart of the silence, his voice rang out: "*Are you enjoying yourself then, Mum?*" Mother frowned and shook her head at him. "*No,*" he said, "*neither am I. I shan't come anymore.*"

When Jesus had healed that woman, she stood up, opened her mouth and praised God—right there in public, in the place where women were not normally allowed to speak at all. She was a woman, her disability had quite probably prevented her from marrying and having children—in that society she would have been the lowest of the low. And for the first time, those religious people heard her voice, heard what she had to say, heard how she wanted to praise God. That is what religion needs: to hear the voice of the people.

So we need children who will ask "*are you really enjoying yourself, Mum?*"

"*How does your church help you to be a good person, Mum?*"

"*Where was God in our church today, Mum?*"

"*Is our religion really changing the world, Mum?*"

It is the searching questions and the challenges of each new generation that will keep our religion pure. And, as we hope and pray today that our Christian community will be a precious gift of God to Jake and to every child brought here for baptism, so we also know that each child is God's gift to us. May the questions Jake asks and the challenges he presents to us, move us forward and ever nearer to God.

Amen.