

Bible Reading for Sunday June 3rd

Mark 2:23-3:6

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

³ Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." ⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Sermon: The “Son on Man” is Lord of the Sabbath

Early in the New Year our New Testament readings came from the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. The Church Lectionary then takes a break, and works through themes from Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, ending last week with Trinity Sunday. We now pick-up the story of Jesus from Mark’s gospel. If you have a good memory, you’ll remember Jesus went to Capernaum and taught in the synagogue, and people were *amazed* at his *authority*.¹ There, a man with an unclean spirit cried out, “I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” Jesus silenced the man and a demon left him. Shortly afterwards, Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, who was sick with a fever.² And then Jesus went throughout Galilee, preaching in the synagogues, exorcising demons, and healing people.³ Mark chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 relate *five* short episodes of what happens when Jesus returns to Capernaum.

Chapter 2 begins with the healing a severely paralysed man who was dramatically lowered on a stretcher through an opening his friends make in the roof and placed before Jesus. “Which do you think it is easier for me to say,” asks Jesus the on-lookers, “‘Your sins are forgiven’, or ‘get up and walk’? So that you may know that the *Son of Man* has authority on earth to forgive sins,” Jesus said to the paralysed man, “Take up your stretcher and go home.” The people were amazed at the miracle and glorified God.⁴ Next we find Jesus eating a meal in the home of Levi, a despised tax collector - people who typically cheated others and conspired with the occupying Romans powers. The Pharisees saw this public act of associating with “sinners” as scandalous! But Jesus said, “Those who are healthy do *not* need a physician, only the sick. I have *not* come to call the righteous but sinners.”⁵ Then, some Pharisees critiqued Jesus and his followers, wondering why *they* did not fast like the Pharisees did - or like the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus told them, “You don’t fast when the bridegroom is with you, only when he is taken away from you.” And, of course, Jesus is referring to himself.⁶ So now, instead of amazement, we begin to see some criticism of Jesus’ actions by the Pharisees.

This group of laypeople often get a bad rap in the Gospels, and this has tragically (and regrettably) fueled anti-Semitism. We need to see the Pharisees’ actions in the context of the religious nationalism of the day, and of their zeal for the Jewish people to keep the Law of Moses following their terrible experience of exile. They thought that the more the people followed the Law, the more likely it was that God would dramatically step into history and vindicate Israel to the world, in the way that they understood from the prophets. In their minds, if the Jewish people continually disobeyed God’s

¹ Mark 1:21-28.

² Mark 1:29-34.

³ Mark 1:39.

⁴ Mark 2:1-12.

⁵ Mark 2:13-17

⁶ The wedding feast was also a symbol of joyful coming of the kingdom of God (e.g., Isa 25:6). He then adds. “No one pours new wine and old wineskins. Otherwise the wine will burst and both the wine and wineskins will be destroyed. Instead new wine is poured into new wine skins” (Mark 2:18-22).

commandments, God would, at the very least, postpone that ultimate day of rescue. That's why they stressed the close observance of the Law.⁷

Having mentioned the issue of fasting, Mark moves on to Sabbath-day observance. Both would have been important for the non-Jewish members of Mark's audience. Religious *practice* in multi-ethnic Christianity was – and still is - a real source of division, and such activities were made more complicated by the early Church's swift adoption of meeting on the *first* day of the week, *Sunday* – the day of resurrection. Keeping the Sabbath was very important to *Jews*; it was – after all - the 5th commandment.⁸ It was one of those behaviours that marked out the Jews for centuries from their neighbours. It was a sign that they belonged to the true God, the creator of the world who himself had rested on the seventh day.⁹ It was, in a sense, a weekly reminder of the need for *shalom*: peace with God, each other, and with creation. Now the details of what one was required to do in order to keep Sabbath were not specified in the Law, and so different rabbis might disagree over whether the disciples were violating that law, but the Pharisees had a reputation of being nit-picking rule keepers!

As the disciples went through a farmer's field on the Sabbath, they picked some of the heads of wheat on their way – and were spotted doing so by keen Pharisees! This act wasn't regarded as theft, since they were not using a sickle,¹⁰ but they were technically breaking the law as they were "reaping" a crop on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees spoke to Jesus, they obviously expected him to stop his disciple's behaviour at once. But he didn't rebuke them; instead he provocatively evokes a precedent pertaining to David when he effectively committed sacrilege by taking holy bread from the High Priest for himself and his armed followers, since they were in dire need of food.¹¹ It was well-understood that Sabbath laws could be set aside in an *emergency*. But Jesus and his disciples were *not* starving, so why allude to David's situation? Mark does not explicitly answer that point, but Jesus responds with the well-known line: "The Sabbath was made for humans, and not humans for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord *even* of the Sabbath."¹²

As we saw earlier, the gospel of Mark has already established that Jesus speaks and acts with *astonishing authority*. The political and religious context of the day, an understandable question in the minds of the Jewish leaders was: "To what end will Jesus exercise his authority?" And Mark has already said, "The Son of Man" – that messianic figure from Daniel – "has authority to forgive sins."¹³

⁷ As a group, the Pharisees had been in existence for about 200 years and were entirely self-chosen. They had no authority to *make* laws, but they did have considerable influence on ordinary people who respected their expertise on Israel's ancient laws and traditions. The Pharisees were not in any sense an official secret police force spying on Jesus and his followers - or on the people in general for that matter. Some were wise, devout, holy men. Others behave like nosy journalists and set themselves up as the self-appointed guardians of public morality of the people in the public eye!

⁸ Exod 20:8-11.

⁹ Gen 2:2-3. (This *priestly* Genesis 1 creation account is to be compared and contrasted with the Adam and Eve story.)

¹⁰ Deut 23:25.

¹¹ See 1 Sam 21:1-6. Note Mark makes an error; it was Ahimelech - not Abiathar - who was high priest at the time! (Matthew and Luke omit the mention of Abiathar.) Moreover, there were more recent situations when the Sabbath-keeping principle was laid aside in an emergency, e.g., 1 Macc 2:34-41.

¹² Mark 2:27.

¹³ Mark 2:10. (See also Dan 7, especially v13.)

This, in the Pharisees' minds, was blasphemy!¹⁴ And now we have another "Son of Man" statement, that he is even master of the Sabbath – the Mosaic Law! These further bold claims the flesh out what Christ's authority means. This repeated identification with the visionary "Son of Man" signified that the Kingdom of God has arrived; God's prophesied reign was breaking in. That is why the earlier fasting was inappropriate; God is doing something new, and Christ's forgiveness and healings were signs of that greater reality. So, to what *end* will Christ use his self-evident authority? The answer is to totally change our understanding of the world as we know it – even Israel's God-given laws would need to be seen in the new light because the Messiah had come. It is *he*, Jesus, who has the authority to *interpret* God's Law.

At first glance Jesus appears to take a shockingly liberal line with respect to Sabbath-keeping. And this has been a problem for strict Sunday observance enthusiasts who have cheerfully transferred the Jewish commandment of observing the seventh day of the week and switched it to celebrating the first day – something the New Testament never actually does. Some may remember this point in the Oscar-winning movie *Chariots of Fire*, when devout Scottish Christian, Eric Liddell, refuses to compete in on a Sunday in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Now, of course, the old-style Sabbath observance as a social phenomenon has gone for good. Even though we mostly believe that one day off from work a week is wise for wholesome living,¹⁵ it is not at all obvious how best, or how most appropriately, to achieve this ideal. (Perhaps we can begin by trying to keep off the internet and WiFi for a day!) However, when we focus on the, "The Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the Sabbath" part of the quote, we are in danger of missing the point. It is *not* that you can't play sports on a Sunday; *nor* does it mean that human beings can determine what they should do with regard to Sabbath. Rather, it states an authoritative interpretation of God's *intention* in giving the Law, and establishes the *Messiah's* authority over people and institutions that otherwise might repress human beings.

This is affirmed in the next Sabbath-day incident at the synagogue. Imagine the scene: the Pharisees are on the *front* row, in the important place of honor, watching and waiting to see what Jesus will do next! We are told there was a man with a "withered" hand.¹⁶ The Greek word implies that the man was not born with that illness, but that his arm was effectively paralyzed for some reason and therefore he couldn't work.¹⁷ The Pharisees assume that Jesus *can* perform miracles; there was no doubt about that in *their* minds – we some have today. The key question was a matter of religious law: will he heal *on the Sabbath*?

So Jesus challenged them: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath, or evil, to save a life or destroy it?"¹⁸ This would *not* have been disputed by any Rabbi. Doing merciful and necessary acts that save

¹⁴ Mark 2:7.

¹⁵ Which was a key point of the 5th commandment – to help give fullness of life and become slaves to work.

¹⁶ Mark 3:1; see also Matt 12:9-14.

¹⁷ In the fragments of the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, the man is described as a stonemason. He says, "I ask you, Jesus, to restore me my health, so I may not beg for my food."

¹⁸ Mark 3:4.

lives always take precedence over Sabbath obligations in an emergency. So a woman in childbirth could be helped on the Sabbath. But, more generally, infections and injuries could be kept from getting *worse*, but they could *not* be actively made *better*. The man's withered hand was a non-urgent case, Jesus could have simply waited until sundown – when Sabbath ended – and heal the man then. Jesus demonstrates that what being “Lord of the Sabbath” means and thereby takes the initiative and forces the issue. Truth upsets people! That's what Jesus seems to be doing here. Jesus told the man to raise his hand *not* to embarrass *him* but to *shame the others* for their lack of sympathy towards him, because Jesus was both angered and grieved by their hardness of heart.¹⁹

And the man's hand was simply healed. It's not clear what Jesus actually *did* in terms of the healing. Did he actually say anything? Mark doesn't say. Nevertheless the outcome is attributed to Christ's presence. What is lost in all this drama is that nothing Jesus physically did could have been construed as “working” on the Sabbath! Symbolically, the man's condition signifies *death* and his healing, *life*. Jesus can't, however, heal a stubborn heart. And whatever “keeping the Sabbath” may mean in practice, it is *not* to be in a spirit of hardheartedness. When we forget to love, forgive, and serve, and replace them with legalism, then the live-giving intent of the Sabbath has been lost.

The Pharisees' response is not amazement, as the reaction had been earlier, but cold hostility. By consciously evoking a controversy with the religious authorities, Jesus puts himself at risk. Since Mark places this incident early in his gospel, it seems that, this argument about the Sabbath played a critical role in the life of Jesus and was one of the factors that led to Jesus to his death. At least that is how Mark, with the benefit of hindsight, portrays it. We are told “the Pharisees went out immediately and began plotting with the Herodians as to how they could assassinate him.”²⁰ Ironically, their determination to see him die was *certainly* against the Law! What is made very clear after these five stories is that the authority of the Son of Man does not fit in with the religious expectation of Christ's contemporaries. Moreover, the proclamation of God's kingdom is opposed not simply by demons in Mark's gospel, but also by human beings.

As we took at these incidents afresh, what are we to make of them for today?

First, for those who wish to force onto others a narrow version of God's rule and reign, take note! This passage reminds us that the things God intends to be good and life-giving, like religious practices, can be idolised. And when we excessively cherish Scripture and religious conventions in themselves, we lose the power to cherish people of God for whom those gifts were given - and for whom Christ died. Put another way, Sundays are not meant to be spent in self-indulgence *nor* self-denial, but in renewal and service. The Sabbath not just to rest and worship, but also to *do* good, to *save* life, and to make

¹⁹ Mark 3:5.

²⁰ Mark 3:6. The Herodian's were not a well-defined political party, but were wealthy aristocrats who were friends and retainers of Herod Antipas. The Herodian's were continually coming into contact with the Romans and, consequently, some Pharisees would've considered them unclean. But they were prepared to enter into an unholy alliance because when there is hate in our hearts we stop at nothing.

life whole for both ourselves and for our neighbor. The incident asks us today what idolized practices in our lives, or even at St Andrew's, does Jesus threaten?

Second, let us *not* focus on the important, practical, ethical and social issues themselves without first zooming back to see the bigger picture of *context*. Even at this early stage of Christ's ministry, those religious leaders correctly perceive that Jesus was offering a radical vision of life with God. Jesus, however, did not scrap the concept of "Sabbath." He was – and is - proclaiming, in word and deed, a new way of understanding who God is, and this is challenging for every generation. God is not confined to *our* religious rules about God, or to our perceptions of God, or of his ways in the world. Moreover, because Jewish understanding of Sabbath impacts not just their identity but wider social practices, Jesus is reconfiguring our relationship to God, not just as individuals but in the very structures of society as well. Such an ethical and social reconfiguration is very threatening and is resisted; that's what is so dangerous about Jesus. The difficult truth is that we would rather kill Jesus than be transformed by his love. Humanity's resistance is great! We would prefer a sleepy God who is subject to *our* rites and rituals to the active, category-busting God who is ever-present in our world. When God gets too close to us, challenging us as Jesus challenged the religious order of his day, then we begin to construct ways and means to kill off God too. In other words we try to make him irrelevant, and then *we* make the rules – we become Lord of the Sabbath!

In conclusion, I leave you with these thought-provoking questions:

- (a) Are we fully appreciating the way in which God's kingdom burst in through the work of Jesus, challenging what we perceive to be sacred, and through freedom and healing showing what God's new world was like? Let us look carefully at our practices and traditions in case our keeping of them means inhibit God's healing and restorative Spirit from breaking in to our lives.
- (b) How can we capture the true spirit of the Sabbath in a world where economic and other abusive forces are frequently far from enhancing life and are oblivious to a spiritual dimension of reality?²¹ Can we learn again to live, work, rest, and help one another in the wider society without becoming legalists in the process?

Let us pray.

²¹ This includes materialism and consumerism.