

***Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6)***

**All Saints, Howick**

**The 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time: Sunday 3 June 2018: 7.30 and 9.30**

Two stories about Jesus: the first, walking through the cornfields, the second, entering the synagogue. Jesus in the workaday world, Jesus entering the church.

And in each case he's in trouble, big trouble, with the Pharisees. In the first story they come straight out with it: why are you doing what's not lawful on the sabbath? In the second they watch him intently to see if he's going to cure the man on the sabbath. It's all about rules, about keeping rules. On a lighter note, have you ever tried to play monopoly or other board games with children only to find yourself in strife with people who change the rules or stick to the rules with a vengeance that borders on fundamentalism?

This business about the sabbath is serious stuff. But you would never guess how a simple experience turned into a major issue. Jesus and his disciples, innocently walking through the corn fields one sabbath day. The disciples began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat them. Now, on an ordinary day that would've been alright. As long as you didn't use a sickle it was OK to pluck the corn. But it was the sabbath and there were literally thousands of petty rules and regulations. You weren't allowed to work but there were 39 different work categories. Four of these were reaping, winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal. Picking a single grain was regarded as reaping, work. And so by their action the disciples had broken the law. And so the Pharisees swung into action: Why are you doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?

Jesus reminds them of a story about David in the OT. David's companions were hungry, had no food. Now it was the practice for

special loaves of bread to be put aside each week as a kind of offering to God. David saw that these people were in need and so he took some of the bread and gave it out, in fact breaking the law. Jesus used that story to show that scripture itself provided a precedent in which human need was paramount. It would be a little bit like using the bread that's stored in the aumbry (what's left over from the service) to feed the hungry. You could argue that our foodbank has a similar purpose. The sabbath, Jesus insists, was made for the sake of man and not man for the sake of the sabbath. Man was not created to be the victim and the slave of sabbath rules. These rules and regulations were in fact intended to make life fuller and better for people.

Three lessons we might learn from this:

1. Religion isn't a matter of rules and regulations. If Christianity only meant going to church, saying our prayers, reading the Bible, it would be quite easy. But we know that it also involves love and forgiveness, doing good works, showing mercy. I read this simple statement the other day and it's worth saying again: Christianity is more concerned with doing things rather than not doing things.
2. If ever our religion stops us from helping someone in need, it's not religion at all. People matter more than systems, people more than procedures.
3. The best way to use sacred things, sacred buildings, is to use them to help people. Of course, we need to be careful and caring about the way we organise our worship, care for our property. But we must keep in mind that the sacred things are only sacred when they're used, like the bread in the OT that was used to feed a starving man. Love, not laws.

We need to be careful though in our approach. On the face of it many of the things we do as Anglicans might seem to put us in a straitjacket,

using only approved services, making sure the colours are right, the clergy are properly dressed, and so on. And so we do have to be careful. But many of these things are intended to offer protection and provide balance. To guard against clergy with their own hobby horses. It does us no harm to use only the approved readings on Sunday. The alternative is to be at the whim of people with their own agendas, follow their own dress codes. We are a people of the book but that book can liberate us, even though we run the danger of being sticklers for rules and regulations.

Then we have the second story, the man who was healed on the sabbath. It was pretty brave of Jesus to go back into the synagogue. He'd already been in strife. It was the act of a man who refused to seek safety, take the easy way out. He was determined to face danger. And there in front of him was the Sanhedrin, a group of religious experts, sitting in the front seats, very conscious of status and standing. It was their job to deal with anyone who was likely to mislead the people. The last thing they were there for was to worship and to learn. And so they watched Jesus' every movement.

And then into the temple came the man with a withered hand. The Greek word means that he had not been born that way but that some illness had taken the strength from him. He came to be healed. Prudence should have suggested that Jesus should have postponed his intervention, he knew that healing on the sabbath was a No-no, he was asking for trouble.

It was the sabbath. All work was forbidden, and to heal was to work. The Jewish law was quite clear about this. Medical attention could only be given if life was at stake. It was OK to assist a woman in childbirth and a throat affection could be treated. However, if a wall fell on someone it was OK to clear enough of the wall to see if the person was

alive or dead. If he was dead the body had to be left until the next day. If he was still alive, he had to wait until tomorrow. A fracture could not be dealt with, a cut finger could be bandaged but no ointment used. What all this meant was that an injury could be kept from getting worse but not made better. The attitudes to the sabbath were quite rigid and unbending.

In the case of the man in the story it was argued that his life was not in danger. He could wait until tomorrow. But for Jesus this was a test case. He told the man to rise and to come out of his place so everyone could see him. He wanted people to see how wretched the man was and then he asked them: is it lawful to do good or to do devil on the sabbath? This put them on the spot. They had to admit that it was lawful to do good and it was a good thing he wanted to do. Yet surely it was an evil thing to leave the poor man when it was quite possible to help him.

And here we have the fundamental difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. To them religion was all about rules, rituals, regulations. Jesus broke these and that convinced them he was a bad man. It's like the man who believes that religion has only to do with going to church, reading the Bible, saying prayers – nothing wrong with those of course. But where it goes wrong is where the man does nothing to help anyone, no sense of sympathy or compassion, who is deaf to the needs of the world around him.

On the other hand, to Jesus religion was service – love of God, love of neighbour. To him the most important thing was not sticking to the rules but responding to human need.

**Noel Derbyshire**