

# *the gift of sabbath*

a sermon preached on the

*second sunday after pentecost*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by father ken hewlett*

the lections: Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 81; 2 Corinthians 4: 5-12; Mark 2: 23-3:6.

Our gospel reading for today opened with the words 'One Sabbath' and closed with 'destroy him'; what is going on here to make Jesus' words and action result in this hostility? We are only in the second Chapter of Mark's gospel and already we see a hot button: Jesus + Sabbath=Conflict.

Sabbath day observance and synagogue service are far from business as usual when Jesus comes to town, a fact that we need to be aware of in contemporary church life and worship. We proclaim that 'this is the Lord's day' and 'that Jesus is present when two or three are gathered in his name'. Could the Jesus who Mark insists creates Sabbath disturbances be the same Jesus who is present with us? Who of us are threatened by his presence today? Who is in awe? Who is prompted to unholy alliances for destruction? Whose authority is pushed beyond breaking point? Whose imagination is stretched and strained beyond the old and safe categories in ways that demand in us a re-thinking of scripture, tradition, God, everything we thought we were doing for God, and everything we thought God was doing for us?

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel in the town of Capernaum, Jesus first saw evil powers collapsing at his presence and on his return he finds that human beings are free to make their own decision. The saving action of Jesus goes on, but Scribes and Pharisees do all they can to show that Jesus is a blasphemer and is someone who does not live according to authentic Jewish tradition. They are not prepared that God is acting in and through Jesus.

This theme reaches its climax in today's Gospel reading. As God's quality control experts, the Scribes and the Pharisees claim they are only doing their job when they observe 'harvesting' on the Sabbath by Jesus disciples. It was acceptable for the passer-by to pick a few ears of corn but not to take a sickle to the field. It seems that the quantity of the ears picked by the disciples of Jesus has caused the Pharisees to claim that the Sabbath Law has been broken—this is a serious infraction which carries the death penalty. What explanation does Jesus make in defence of his disciples?

Jesus' response has two points, one more radical than the other. In the first place Jesus recalls an event from Israel's past, when the loaves of offering were eaten by David and his men [v.25-26]. If this serious offence was no longer an offence for David and his men when they were in need, isn't this what the disciples of Jesus are doing? Then the Pharisees are left red-faced, defeated at their own game of interpreting the Scriptures.

However, the heart of the issue is not so much the correct interpretation of Scripture; rather what is important is the right understanding of God's plans. The Sabbath must never become a law

unto itself, forcing human beings into situations of suffering. Jesus the Christ comes as Lord of the Sabbath, to show others the right order of relationships between Creator, Christ and humanity.

The thrust of Jesus' response is contained in the two pronouncements, which bring to a close the first of our conjoined stories. The first pronouncement attempts to unhinge Sabbath day from the penalty oppressive practice of Sabbath-keeping that developed by the first century. The day had become an event which required more work to keep it than if they had no day of rest at all. Moreover Jesus' declaration that the Sabbath was a gift from God for humanity, for humanity's benefit, is liberating. Jesus not only calls the Pharisees to the best of their tradition for an enlightened understanding of the Sabbath, but he trumps the tradition by the second pronouncement: 'so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath'.

And as if to prove the point, Jesus goes back into the synagogue and heals a man with a withered hand. The conflict is both powerful and public. In a further debate with Jesus over the correct use of the Sabbath, the Pharisees are reduced to silence. The response to this silence is that the ultimate revenge must be taken. This man must be eliminated: 'the Pharisees went out at once to plot with the Herodians against him, discussing how to destroy him'. Arch-enemies Pharisees and Herodians unite to rid themselves of this man who disturbs the established order by courageously bringing in the 'new wine' of God's reign.

Jesus reframes the Sabbath as a gift from God—nowhere in Jesus' ministry does he proscribe the Sabbath Day or its observance for his followers. In fact, the implication in his words and actions is that the Sabbath as gift will continue in perpetuity for Jesus' followers. There is I think an ongoing need for Christians to reclaim this gift and open it anew for their own benefit. Our freedom from the law as those 'in Christ' has not resulted in a freedom to the law and all its God-intended benefits for our spiritual shaping and maturation. Some Christian communities practice a new kind of ironic legalism which functionally forbids Sabbath observance. Yet in our existing western affluent culture the church could well be strengthened and enriched by having a day each week separated from the others for the purpose of freedom – a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence from external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilisation, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow humans and the forces of nature. Instead, we often vulgarise the day and call that Sabbath observance.

The Sabbath is not a day for fireworks and somersaults, but an opportunity to mend our tattered lives, to collect rather than dissipate time. Historically it was the Romans who anxiously sought after bread and circus games to fill their recreational free time, the ancient equivalent of our meat pies and football. But humanity does not live on bread and circus games alone. The Sabbath is the most precious present humanity has received from the treasure house of God. What would it look like to like to receive the Sabbath anew as a gift from God?

How can we respond to the challenge as a church to reinitiate into the church's life the gift of the Sabbath for its own rest and well-being, for the social good, for personal transformation, and for a witness to the world as to who our God is and who we are as this God's covenant community?

The broader issue in this text this morning is the nature of gift-receiving and law-keeping. How do we receive what God gives, keeping the commands as gifts of God's grace and covenant, while refraining from legalism and power games? Deification of a law changes the law into something else, as does the antinomian reaction to strict law observance. The middle way of faithfulness to what God has given and what God calls us to in obedience is reception without destruction, observance without manipulation. This is the live tensive stance of faith, which recognises the nature of Christian reception of God's gifts and observance of God's laws to be acts of stewardship. We are stewards of what God gives, especially those gifts which disclose God's and our own identity and purpose in the world. The Sabbath gift cuts to the heart of identity disclosure on both the divine and human levels and thus became then and becomes now a flash point for theology, worship and discipleship.

It must always be part of the Church's mission to stand 'over and against' a society which is necessarily marked by selfishness and superficiality. Jesus leads the way. The ways of God so often conflict with the ways of contemporary society, and we suffer because of this conflict. We are pushed towards the peripheries of society, regarded as irrelevant, as we stand for values that mean little to the majority position. This is hard to live with, but today's gospel reading encourages us by reminding us that Jesus has been down this way before.