

Sermon
Therfield Chapel
Mark 2: 23 - 3:12
Title: Jesus recovers the Sabbath

In July 2001 Julie and I moved to London and I got a job teaching at a Sixth Form in Golders Green which has a high proportion of Orthodox Jews living there

Now the college was located directly on the famous North Circular Road and right outside the college is a footbridge which crosses the busy dual-carriage way

According to my colleagues at the college, the bridge hadn't been there for very long; in fact it had been built in response to the death of an elderly Jewish gentleman who had died crossing the road at that spot

Apparently before the bridge there was a Pelican Crossing and the Jewish man on his way back from the Synagogue and unwilling to break the Sabbath code, refused to press the button to operate the crossing, stepped out and was instantly killed by a car

To Orthodox Jews, the Sabbath rules as laid down in the Torah (what we would call the Old Testament) prohibit a whole range of activities from taking place

As dusk approached on a Friday in Golders Green, it was highly dangerous to be on the road; one was forever encountering crazed Jewish drivers rushing home just in time to get their cars off the road in time for the start of the Sabbath

Most Orthodox homes contained timer-switches to allow lights to switch on automatically on the Sabbath morning to ensure that no one had to touch a light switch and so break the rules

It was all taken very seriously

And seriousness about the Sabbath – and controversy over it – is not a new thing

For here in our text we find Jesus engaged in two disputes over Sabbath issues

First of all in Chapter 2 verses 23-28 we find the disciples walking with Jesus through some cornfields on the Sabbath

It seems that they were hungry and in order to try and relieve their hunger a little they begin to collect and eat the grains of corn

Luke's gospel adds that they rubbed the grain in their hand (6:1), presumably to separate the husk from the chaff

Now it appears that there were some Pharisees accompanying them and immediately we find them rounding on the disciples:

"Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Now it's important to realise that the Pharisees saw themselves as the enforcing officers of the law

And the Sabbath was part of that law; any attempt to undermine or redefine the meaning of the Sabbath seems to have been viewed by them as an attack on their monopoly position as guardians of that law

The Jews were rightly proud of the fact that God had revealed His law to them and the Pharisees, desperate to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people knew that if they could prove that he or his followers were breakers of the law they would score a great victory

They knew better than anyone that the fourth commandment expressly forbade that any work could take place on the Sabbath¹

And the Pharisees had spent years defining just what constituted work

They wanted to be on the safe side and ensure that they or anyone else didn't break the law

And to that end they had defined 1521 regulations on Sabbath observance and they prohibited 39 types of work which were forbidden on the Sabbath

According to the Pharisees, it seems likely that the disciples had engaged in two of these forbidden types of work

Firstly, in picking the heads of grain, the disciples were guilty of 'reaping' on the Sabbath

And secondly in rubbing (the grain) in their hands the disciples stood accused of 'threshing' on the Sabbath

Either way, to the Pharisees, these men were Sabbath breakers

Now reading through the various gospel accounts, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus was deliberately seeking to undermine the particular spin that the Pharisees had put on the Sabbath

And we see that here

But in doing so we need to be aware of the size of his challenge to these Pharisees

For in tackling their interpretation of the Sabbath, Jesus was really declaring war on the whole religious establishment and their right to police the nation's conduct ²

No wonder they were threatened

¹ Exodus 20: 8

² Warren Wiersbe, Be Diligent p29.

Now let's look at Jesus' response (verse 25)

²⁵He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶In 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."

So Jesus – as he so often did - takes his accusers back to the Old Testament and to 1 Samuel 21

You will probably remember the story

David and his men are fleeing for their lives from King Saul

And after being chased for a long time they are hungry and arrive at the Tabernacle of Meeting

There was no ordinary bread for them to eat and so they persuade the priest to let them eat the showbread which the LORD had said was only to be eaten by the priests

Then using this account as an illustration Jesus declares (verse 27-28):

²⁷Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

So that's our first story

Then in chapter 3 we have a related story again concerning the Sabbath

Perhaps this is the same day, we don't know; but here we find Jesus entering a synagogue on the Sabbath

Presumably he was going to worship

And in the synagogue there is a man with a shrivelled hand

It seems likely that the whole thing was a set-up – this man was probably a plant – placed there by those looking for a reason to accuse Jesus

They wanted to see if he would heal the man and thereby in their minds engage in work on the Sabbath

There's a church tradition that the man with the shrivelled hand was a plasterer who needed his hand to do his job

We don't really know; in any case he had a debilitating condition

In verse 3 Jesus, seemingly aware that he was being watched, rose to their challenge

He could have secretly healed the man to avoid a scene but instead he refuses to be intimidated and invites him to stand up in front of everyone

And before he heals him Jesus throws the ball back into the Pharisees' court by asking them a question:

"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

And the text tells us that they remained silent

And so getting no response from them, Jesus angered and distressed at their stubborn hearts tells the man to stretch out his hand

He couldn't do that of course - his hand was shrivelled; but when he obeys Jesus and tries it his hand is healed – completely restored we read

And the immediate response of the Pharisees (verse 6) is to go out and plot with the Herodians as to how they might kill Jesus

Interestingly the Pharisees and Herodians were arch-enemies who hated each other's vision for Israel

The Pharisees were committed to ridding the nation of the Roman occupation and of the puppet Herod kings whom they established and protected

In complete contrast, the Herodians, as their name suggests, were supporters of that very monarchic system

And so on most days these two factions hated one another

But today, as has happened so often in history, two opposing parties united around a common enemy and were found plotting how they might kill the Lord Jesus

And so here we find Jesus doing what he invariably did, he drives evil out into the open and un.masks it

You might think that such a miracle would provoke the Pharisees and to think again about Jesus

Surely if he could do such a thing, thought must given to who he was and what he was saying?

But no

It's a scary thought to observe just how hard the Pharisees' hearts were

They were so blinkered by their own agenda to discredit Jesus that even something as amazing as a miracle performed right before their very own eyes couldn't persuade them to look for other conclusions about who Jesus was than those they already held

Their minds were fixed

This man was a threat to their status and to their authority and he had to be eliminated

It seems there was no higher priority than their position in the nation as custodians of the law

They had long since abandoned the quest for truth

They wanted their version of ‘the truth’ about the world and anyone who undermined it had to be removed, just in case their truth came to be exposed as a lie

And that is exactly what Jesus was about

So in their minds there was no room for negotiation

Now let me now make four comments on these accounts:

(1) The Sabbath Affirmed

It’s important to realise that nowhere in these accounts – nor anywhere else in the gospels – is Jesus suggesting that he is out to abolish the Sabbath

How could he?

Didn’t he tell us in the Sermon on the Mount that he didn’t come abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfil them?³

Didn’t he say, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law...”

And as we saw before, keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments – number four

I understand the Ten Commandments as the unchangeable revealed will of God for the human race

And reading back before the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses we find that The Sabbath was put in place at Creation; because God rested on the Seventh Day, we too are to rest and to treat it differently

And that means that it is still wrong to treat the Lord’s Day like any other day

The first lesson: the Sabbath still stands

(2) The Sabbath Reassessed

³ Matthew 5:17 ff

What Jesus seems to be doing here in these accounts is to get the Jews of his day, and us of course (if necessary), to re-evaluate The Sabbath

With all their rules and regulations, The Pharisees had made the Sabbath into a burden for the people

They had hijacked it from its original purpose

They seemed to be using it –like the rest of the law – as a test of Godliness

Keeping it – in their minds - was a test of how righteous you were

Observing the Sabbath on their terms was one of the rungs of the ladder that helped you reach God

But here in the first story – of the cornfield – Jesus smashes their misconceptions by declaring that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath

In other words the Sabbath – like all of the law - was created for the good of the human race rather than to be a burden to bear

On the other hand the Pharisees seem to have been more concerned about the principle of the Sabbath than what it was for

And Jesus makes it clear that it was created for the good of human beings

It was made for Man

Or to put it another way, Man was not made to be a slave to the Sabbath

So here we find Jesus attempting to return Sabbath observance to its original and proper understanding

We need a day off from our normal work and routines

A day off for rest is essential for human well-being; to try and do without rest and relaxation and time contemplating our Creator is foolish

During the French Revolution in their bid to remove Christianity from their thinking the leaders tried to change the creational seven day week to a ten day week

But it was soon found that people couldn't go 10 days without a break and in 1805 Napoleon was forced to change it back to the seven day pattern⁴

During the Russian Revolution an attempt was made to make Sunday into a working day – so workers would work seven days without a rest

But Stalin was forced to restore Sunday as a day of rest; the people needed time off

⁴ I am indebted to Michael Baughen for these two historical observations.

Human beings need a break; in this sense the Sabbath is good common sense (something rapidly dying out I fear)

Arguably, the fast pace of life today, makes Sabbath rest more important than say during the 1950s when the pace of life was slower

So we ignore Sabbath observance at our peril

It was invented by God for the good of human beings

The second lesson; Jesus' seeks to restore the Sabbath to its original intention

The Sabbath is to be a benefit, not a burden

(3) The Sabbath: A Day for Doing Good

A third lesson from this passage is that Jesus uses the Sabbath day for doing good to others rather than just for resting

As we've seen, Jesus heals a man who has a withered hand

Now in the first two chapters of Genesis we read of the days of Creation

And at the end of each day we read "And there was evening and there was morning the first day" and then the second day and the third and so on until the sixth day

In other words it is recorded that each of the first six days has a start and an end

The seventh day – you'll remember – is when God rested

But we are never told that the seven day ends

And most commentators are led to the conclusion that the seventh day is still ongoing – it is now

We are still in the seventh day of creation; and God is still resting

But that doesn't mean he's doing nothing because he still "retains a caring and sustaining role

He retains a concern for people and an enjoyment of His creation"⁵ even on the Seventh Day (the day of rest)

And we pick up a similar theme in our passage

When David was hungry and eats the holy show bread – the bread that was set apart for a sacred purpose – he uses it to relieve his hunger

⁵ Michael Baughen

There's a lesson here that a holy thing – the bread in this case – isn't just for show

For Jesus seems to approve of that bread being taken and used to help someone in need

And so it is with the Holy Day of the Sabbath – it is right and good to use it for caring for others

It's as if the Sabbath's special status doesn't – as the Pharisees seemed to think – mean that has to be handled with kid gloves, admired from a distance and given so much reverence that it has no practical value

You can see how Jesus demonstrates this by using the Sabbath for good and healing someone

In doing so he establishes the Sabbath as a positive thing upon which to do good rather than as a negative thing which simply has a long list of don't attached to it

And for us as Christians living today the Sabbath isn't necessary a day of rest – but it is a day for change and serving God and others

Most of us do a lot of work on the Sabbath

We might preach, look after children, cook meals, befriend people, provide hospitality

It might give us time for our children

It might be time to develop friendships

People in God's kingdom are those who care and serve others

So by Jesus' actions in healing the man he uses the day for the benefit of people and encourages us to do the same

But another related point is in order here

In opposing the healing of the man, the Pharisees thought that they were in tune with the Sabbath – indeed they thought they were in tune with God's will

But notice the way in which Jesus exposes the folly of their thinking

They saw themselves as dedicated to preserving the Sabbath by seeking to kill Jesus because he healed on that day

But Jesus exposes their hypocrisy when he says:

"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

It's as if he's saying: "On the Sabbath you are seeking to kill me. And you think that you're more in tune with the God of the Sabbath than I am who is about to heal a man on the Sabbath?"

So Jesus he exposes their hypocrisy and demonstrates just out far removed they really were from being enforcers of God's will

And in doing so he establishes the principle that the Sabbath is an occasion for good not for harm

That it is not just a day to do nothing

(4) The Sabbath and the New Creation

The Sabbath looks ahead to the new creation

Now I'm jumping a little ahead of the text now

But within a maximum of three years, for his followers, Jesus' resurrection had displaced the Sabbath from the last day of the week to the first day of the week

From the Saturday to the Sunday we would say

As we know Sunday was the day that Jesus rose from the dead and as if he wanted to reinforce it as their new day of worship, he appeared to his disciples exactly a week after the day of his resurrection and they worshipped him on that Sunday

The Resurrection was really the turning point in history

The old Adam was dead and the new Adam was alive

The old order of death and decay was struck a deadly blow and a new order of life and salvation was instituted

And the shifting of the Sabbath seems to me to be an abiding picture of that reality

The old creation is in its twilight and the new one has dawned

It's as if the old Sabbath couldn't contain what had happened in death and resurrection of Jesus

In Russian the word for Sunday simply means resurrection

And every Sabbath Sunday is a reminder of the resurrection

Every Sunday is a prompt that our Lord is no longer dead in his tomb but is alive for evermore

That the new week – the new creation – has begun

I like keeping up with the news – I listen to the radio, read the BBC News' website regularly and read newspapers

And of course many people read a Sunday newspaper

But I try and avoid it (reading a Sunday paper)

The news tells us about this world

But in one sense Sunday is a day to think about the world to come

The resurrected world

For Jesus' resurrection is but the first part of a resurrected universe

Lesson 4: The Sunday Sabbath is a reminder of the Resurrection of Jesus