

Sermon for 2nd June 2024, Year B, Pentecost 2, Proper 4

Preached at St John's Baillieston,

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23 - 3:6

Sermon

And so, after the long journey through the intense experiences of Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity, we return, blinking, into the peaceful sunlit uplands of Ordinary Time when, for the rest of the summer and autumn, we can return to listening peaceably at the feet of Jesus, back in the halcyon days in Galilee, when it seemed that for his disciples, things could only get better.

But sadly, there's not much peace in our gospel reading from Mark. Jesus is already provoking a row with the Pharisees over their interpretation of what you're allowed to do or not do on the Sabbath day. We're only in the second chapter of Mark's gospel and already he's offended one group so much that they're conspiring to destroy him.

On the face of it, the message is straightforward. Jesus is complaining that the religious teachers of his day have taken what was meant to be a great blessing to humanity – the divinely mandated day of rest for everyone, even slaves – and turned it into just another depressing day when people needed to be watched intently to make sure they didn't break any rules. Somehow 'no work on the Sabbath' seems to have become 'No joy on the sabbath, no compassion, no freedom'.

Jesus, in contrast, is trying to reestablish the idea that a day of rest is supposed to be a blessing from God, not just another random religious rule that if you don't follow, you're going to hell. By putting Sabbath day observance into the ten commandments, God was ensuring that nobody could be forced to work seven days a week without rest, or even feel guilt-tripped into doing so, not even

a slave, or a woman, or any other powerless member of society or social outcast. Without God's instruction, it's easy to imagine that kings and rulers and business owners of every kind would soon find good theological reasons why all their people should work every waking hour.

It seems that there's something in almost every human heart that always tempts us to turn God's blessings into strict religious rules of behaviour. We start off with a commandment that protects someone from exploitation and helps them to flourish, and before you know it that law is being used to browbeat and dominate the very people it was supposed to defend and encourage. Either that, or all the rich people find a way around the rule and then strictly enforce it on everyone else. You may remember Jesus pointing out the poor widow who had given everything she had to the temple, while the rich people were avoiding giving anything by invoking various tax loopholes. Sounds very familiar.

Despite having the example of Jesus's teaching and actions, the Christian Church too has never really escaped this basic temptation to take every freedom and liberation offered by Love and try to turn it into a life-draining rule and restriction.

One of the greatest ironies of our faith is the way that the early Christian leaders like Peter and Paul heard God telling them to let go of strict religious rules like circumcision and food laws, even though these things were strictly mandated in the Old Testament, only for later Christians to insist that any instruction written in the New Testament by those same leaders must surely be obeyed by all people for all time.

So while Peter heard God tell him that He had made all foods clean, and Paul had no problem liberating the Christian faith from circumcision to make it acceptable to Greeks and Romans, Christians in later centuries still found it almost impossible to accept that the Holy Spirit might eventually change the

rules in a later time and a different culture to allow women to speak in church and even preach and preside at the altar.

But we mustn't mock the grumpy Pharisees. The truth is they're no different to the rest of us. They share our human tendency to want to solidify all uncertainty into clear rules, so we know where we stand.

Someone in one of my previous churches always used to beg me to say clearly in my sermons how I thought people should behave in various circumstances. It wasn't enough to try to inspire people towards love and compassion and forgiveness and reconciliation; they wanted specific moral rules to follow in specific situations.

But for me, the Christian faith has never been about figuring out religious rules, firstly because there are endless exceptions in any situation, and secondly because strict rules somehow always manage to exclude and reject someone that God wanted to include and welcome.

Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" How awful that he even has to ask. But still today a gay couple might need to ask, "is it lawful for us to hold each other's hand in public? Or will someone shout at us and try to shame us?"

As God said in both the Old Testament and in the New: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice". Following Jesus is all about opening our hearts to love and empathy, not ticking boxes of religious rules. But living without rules and trusting God's love to guide us makes us uncomfortable. We like predictability. We like to know how our religion works, exactly what we need to do in order to get God's approval. We like to know that we're in the right, that we're one of the good ones.

But I've come to believe that following Jesus is all about continually and intentionally opening ourselves up to a wild discombobulating love that we can

never predict nor control. He wants us to reach out and be kind to people we have excellent reasons for ignoring at all costs.

Rules keep us comfortable and acceptable and safe, but I need that edgy Jesus who heals on the Sabbath and loves the sinner. He's the one I fell in love with, who has the power to change everything.