

Sermon 3rd June 2018 "While you are waiting....?"

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Mark 2.23-3.6

There's a story about an American tourist driving through a remote part of Southern Ireland. It was a very hot day and he was pleased, having not passed anyone in over 30 minutes, to find a little pub albeit in the middle of nowhere where he could stop for lunch and ask directions. On entering the pub, he found it completely empty apart from the Landlord, who greeted him with a big smile and welcome. "Gee this is wonderful" he said, "I'm dying for a cold beer." "I'm sorry sir, we're shut" replied the Landlord. "But its only two o clock and your door is open" said the American. "Ah no, it's a minute after two and we shut at two, that's the law". The American laughed thinking the Landlord was having a joke at his expense, but he wasn't and steadfastly refused to serve the tourist. "But there's no-one within 5 miles who will know that you served me and it's only a minute past two" argued the American. But the Landlord was having none of it and despite every argument, protest or appeal to logic, humanity or future trade agreements the Landlord was adamant that he would not serve him a drink before the pub re-opened at six o clock. Finally, in exasperation the American angrily exclaimed "well I'm just going to sit here until you do open". "Oh yes, that's fine Sir" said the Landlord "and while you are waiting, would you like a drink?"

By choosing to live in a society, it is generally recognised that we accept, even if we don't necessarily agree with, the laws and tolerances of that society or culture. We could debate all morning as to the reasons why we need so many laws but for simplicity let's go with the common understanding that laws exist to establish standards, maintaining order, resolving disputes, and protecting liberties and rights. In fact the law could be looked on as the guidelines for minimally acceptable behaviour in **society**.

I could be cynical and say that laws are only enforceable if they are backed up by the corresponding severity of punishment for transgression; make the punishment fit the crime so to speak. But this is very black and white and almost impossible to regulate without a degree of interpretation. Justice needs to be seen to be done but this should not be the excuse to punish the innocent or overlook the truth. Let me give you an easy example. Driving in a bus lane would rightly attract a fine. But what if the driver moved into the lane to allow an ambulance or fire engine through?

The Judaic law, handed down by God to Moses described in Deuteronomy, was if anything equally open to debate and requiring of interpretation than most laws of the time.

It may seem strange to suggest that God was not clear in his direction but he was giving the Jews a template for all behaviour. However, as they will be the first to admit, Jews have a dry sense of humour and love a good argument. There is a Jewish saying "Ask two Jews, get three opinions." So the Rabbis and religious leaders across the Diaspora not just in Jerusalem, worked overtime debating and issuing 'interpretations' or clarification on just about any topic you could think of whether it be a principal or a specific action. As I was writing this I thought of the Rabbi in Fiddler on the Roof being constantly asked all sort of daft questions and expected to find a wise answer? I remember a character saying "Rabbi can I ask you a question? Can I ask you, is there a proper blessing...(and he paused) for the Tsar?" and the Rabbi after some thought said:

Rabbi : A blessing for the Tsar? Of course! May God bless and keep the Tsar... far away from us!

So, we get to today's readings; readings both centred around interpretation of a principal rather than the act. The act, in the first story, of eating the grain stalks was not as you might expect construed as stealing. Deuteronomy 23. 25 clearly states that "if you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain". This may sound strange to us but is a good example because it ended up becoming interpreted into Judaic law with farmers instructed not to harvest but to leave the crops or fruit around the outside of a field for those who were poor or hungry. Jesus defends his disciples' actions by referring to scripture, namely the Priest giving David consecrated bread when he was fleeing from Saul (1 Samuel 21. 1-6) and uses the Priest's actions as an example of sustaining the life of a weary traveller.

Similarly, the act of healing the man with the withered hand was obviously not a crime. But it was done on the Sabbath and the Pharisees want to interpret the miracle as 'work' thereby contravening the Sabbath law. But Jesus' response, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" left them with little room for manoeuvre on moral or indeed religious grounds. Contrary to the Pharisees opinion, Mark actually portrays Jesus as honouring the intent of the Sabbath when Jesus claims that as the objective of the law is to save and preserve life (Deut. 30.19-20) what better day than the Sabbath to do this. Okay, one could argue that the man may not have been dying but by restoring his hand Jesus may have been giving him back the ability to work, to feed his family, and of course his wholeness and dignity. Would Jesus have been right to have ignored him or was he

acting as God would have wanted him to? It's that fine line of interpretation but to oppose the argument would only serve to put the Pharisees in a moral maze.

So, why the confrontation. Why all the aggression and anger? Well, there are two issues at stake here. Firstly as we have seen, there is the interpretation of what constitute Sabbath observance or perhaps more importantly who is the Sabbath for, God or mankind. But realistically, Jesus has already circumvented this argument by referring to Deuteronomy 5.12-15 in which God institutes the Sabbath so that his people who have toiled in slavery can at least have one day of rest. It is interesting that Rabbinic traditions dating to a century after Jesus express the opinion that "The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it" (J. Marcus, 2000). So we can place this issue to one side.

The secondary issue, which stemmed from the first but is probably more important was the Pharisees displeasure, anger, frustration, call it what you will, at being challenged on what they would have considered their home ground i.e. the law. The fact that Jesus argues on both these issues from a scriptural background challenges their assurance and position as advocates and upholders of the law. His willingness to justify his actions by contradicting traditionally accepted behaviour with logical and moral legal interpretation is an affront to their status and piety. After all, this was their job! Jesus was openly challenging their authority and of course, when he declared himself the "lord" or "master" of the Sabbath itself, they saw this as verging on blasphemy. So the scene is set. We are only 79 verses into Mark's Gospel and already the Pharisees (and surprisingly the Herodians) want to destroy Jesus.

It is often assumed, and wrongly so, that Jesus was opposed to the law. But in neither of these examples did Jesus reject the law. He certainly does not discard or belittle the importance of the Sabbath. Neither does he criticise or insult the Pharisees for their open hostility and intransigence. He simply interprets the spirit of the law in such a way that it removes the man-made barriers and restrictions and presents a more rational, logical and practical observance.

But reason is never going to sway the minds of those who do not want to see or hear it. And this serves as a good example of how the best of intentions and motives can get subverted. The reaction to Jesus' ministry demonstrates more than anything how institutions and law makers can become so self important that they become their own self fulfilling prophecy; how the laws and procedures become an end in themselves and where legitimate concerns or actions of those outside the 'organisation' have to be stifled so that nothing threatens the status quo or stability of that organisation.

How many times have we seen poor decisions made because 'that's how they are always done'? When does the law become more important than the principle it is trying to protect. You only have to look at the way the legal system in this country has dealt with victims of rape or sexual violence or how the wealthy are allowed to use loopholes to avoid taxes whilst the poor get pursued for every penny; how equality for women is still aspirational and only now forcing its way into the public domain.

The argument over women clergy and homosexuality has divided the Church for years. Both sides argue their case vehemently citing scripture to prove for and against the arguments and many are even prepared to create a schism in the Anglican Communion to maintain their position. Is this really what the Church is about? Are we more focussed on tradition and ritual than on meaning and action? At no time in history have we been more aware of the human tragedy in our world and yet it just gets worse. Even in a town like Wokingham we have a Foodbank servicing several poor families, we have child carers many at primary school age losing their childhood by having to spend their time supporting relatives, we have hostels for those with mental health problems being shut down and more and more agencies relying on good will and volunteers to keep their doors open to serve those in real need. We have unemployed and homeless people on our doorstep.

I know that many people here today do get involved to help and support. It is our calling as Christians to open our eyes to see not what is inside the Church but what is outside. In our reading today, Jesus, like the God who instituted the Sabbath is committed to preserving life and helping those less fortunate. His ministry set out to expose oppression and fear, religious hypocrisy and legal pretence. If we want to be Christ like, we would do well to start rethinking today how we feel about this and about what we do and why we do it. And while we are doing that lets ask God for direction moving forward, starting with the use of our Church as we approach the public launch of our Community Church Project on 21st June.

Amen

Marcus, J. (2000) *'Mark 1-8'*; New York, Doubleday