

“WHO’S THE BOSS? (Mark 9)”

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Jesus is having a bit of a hard time of it. He has arrived in Galilee, bringing with him a radical new message, a new offer of hope and peace for a world in desperate need of change. Jesus, the appointed and anointed messenger of God – indeed, the very Son of God – has come to offer a totally new agenda to men and women, a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new way of looking at the world and relating to God that cannot really be taken seriously without a complete rethink about what life is all about, without a total transformation of individuals and society. Jesus came to pour the new wine of God’s kingdom into the new wineskins of open hearts and minds.

And that, quite naturally, brought him into conflict with those whose hearts and minds were not open, the custodians of the religious and social status quo and the re-interpreters of the Law of Moses. Over the past couple of weeks we have seen Jesus running up against the Pharisees and others over the issues of feasting – and, more particularly, the people with whom he chooses to feast – and fasting, which he has said is quite inappropriate when he has come to announce the celebration of a new age.

But now he tackles the Big One. The issue of coming into contact with unsuitable people, who might lead to ritual uncleanness, is important, but a few prayers and a bit of religious washing can sort that out. Fasting is really only prescribed for one day a year and other fast days are to a very great extent at the discretion of the individual. In the two stories we’ve read this morning, Jesus runs head first into a fight about the Sabbath. This isn’t something that can be glossed over. It’s not a matter of opinion.

The Sabbath is central to Jewish identity. It’s a sign of the covenant God made with his people and, more than that, it is an integral part of creation. God rested from creative work on the seventh day and he calls all those who identify with his people to do the same. When the Old Testament prophets upbraided the people of Israel and Judah over their keeping of the Sabbath, it wasn’t about the actual setting aside of the seventh day – they never seemed to be in any doubt that the Sabbath should be kept as a day away from work – but about their attitudes to it and to what they were doing. You didn’t mess with the Sabbath day if you were a true child of Abraham.

And the Pharisees knew that. They knew how vital it was to the people’s sense of who they were. They knew that it was a non-negotiable in the lives of the people of Israel. And so they set themselves up as the true guardians of the tradition, re-interpreting for each new generation the rules and regulations which hedged it about. They knew what could and couldn’t be done. They knew the bounds of what was acceptable – and still do. The Hasidim of Stamford Hill still know that if you have a cold on the Sabbath, you cannot put a handkerchief in your pocket, because that would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath, but you can tie it round your wrist, because that is wearing it. I attended the Bar Mitzvah of a friend’s son, and the rabbi had to extemporise his sermon because, in order to avoid carrying his notes on the Sabbath, he posted them to the synagogue, but the postman hadn’t arrived by the time of the service. (It’s OK for the postman to work on the Sabbath, but not the rabbi!)

Those examples may appear to trivialise the subject, but, in fact, they highlight just what a serious issue it is still today and give us some idea what an immense thing it would be to contravene any of the Sabbath regulations. And here we have not one but two examples of Jesus’ behaviour which bring this whole area of Jewish observance right into the centre of the picture. What is the attitude of Jesus to all of this? How radical is this new message which he has come to proclaim? Will he show himself to be a faithful observer of the limits placed on the behaviour of God’s people? Well, at the heart of this section are a couple of sentences which give us the key to Jesus’ understanding of what is going on.

Vv27,28 are a powerful challenge to the status quo and to our own attitudes today. They were controversial not only for the Pharisees and the keepers of the tradition, but they have been the subject of

debate for generations of biblical scholars and teachers. An enormous amount has been written about these few words and there are all kinds of different interpretations of them. We could get horribly bogged down in all the varied and different ways of looking at these words, but I want to offer you another interpretation of them this morning. Let's look at the two stories, though, as we continue to learn from Mark's story of Jesus' life.

In the first story, Jesus and his disciples are out in the fields. (Actually, Jesus is not named in this story, but most versions assume that it's about him, and there's no reason not to.) In Jesus' day, before such things as Green Belt policies and ring roads, the fields would come up more or less to the houses themselves and it was fairly common to take a short cut from one village to the next by walking through the fields. Jesus and his friends may well have been doing that, perhaps in order to avoid walking too far on the Sabbath – the maximum distance you could travel on a Sabbath (the "*Sabbath day's journey*" we read of elsewhere) was about half a mile. Because the fields were so close to the village, the Pharisees would have had no difficulty watching the little group approaching through the standing corn.

As they walked along, Jesus' friends appeared to be picking the ears of corn and eating them. We've probably all done that as we've walked along the side of a field in summer. In itself, there was nothing wrong with that. In fact, the Law of Moses made specific provision for it, as you can read in *Deuteronomy 23:25*. Of course, you couldn't go into your neighbour's field with a combine harvester (even if they'd been invented), but a few ears of corn weren't going to make much difference. The problem, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, was that even picking a few ears of corn by hand was technically harvesting, and that *was* forbidden by the Law (*Exodus 34:21*).

As Jesus and his little group approach the Pharisees, the legal eagles ask Jesus a question. Why are they breaking the Law on the Sabbath? Jesus responds with another question. It's a typically Jewish way of conversing – in fact, whole conversations can take place without anyone ever giving a straight answer. [Do you think it's going to rain, then? *Why ask me?* Who else should I ask? *Can't you think of anyone else?* Well, would they give me an answer? *Have you tried?* Didn't I try you? *Yes, but am I the only one?* Don't you have an opinion, then? *Don't you think the weather forecast is more likely to be correct?* Have you ever watched it? – and so on, until it starts raining.]

Jesus' question/response refers them to the story of the ancient king, David, who went into the Temple when his men were hungry and asked the priests, Ahimelech and Abiathar (who was later to become High Priest), if they could have some of the specially consecrated bread to eat. According to the Law, only the priests could eat the special bread, which was put on display on the Sabbath, but as David and his men, who were on the run from their enemies, were close to starvation, the priests let them eat some of it. It seemed to be a case of human need justifying an infringement of the Law.

The second episode in our reading today takes place in the synagogue itself. It's clear that Jesus regularly went to worship with his fellow Jews in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and on this occasion there was a man with some kind of disability in his hand, probably a form of paralysis. The Pharisees are there, watching to see what Jesus will do. They don't seem to have any doubts that Jesus *can* heal – after all, they've already had opportunity to witness that first hand. The question bothering them is whether he *will* heal. Again, there were conventions to be followed here. Although there was no particular reference to such a situation in the Law of Moses, nevertheless the tradition which had grown up over the centuries laid down that, on the Sabbath, aid could be given to someone who was ill only if their life was in danger.

Jesus, no doubt aware of the likely response of the Pharisees, invites the man to come out into the middle of the congregation, where it will be obvious what is going on, and makes it clear that he is going to heal him. Before he does, he asks another question of the assembled worshippers: What's preferable on the Sabbath, doing good by trying to save a life? Or doing evil by trying to kill someone? That's a question that is dripping with irony, because as soon as the service is over, the Pharisees rush out of the synagogue

and start plotting to kill Jesus – on the Sabbath! – together with their usual enemies, the pro-Roman supporters of Herod, the Herodians.

So, in cases of extreme need, there is provision for the Law to be set aside, and there's actually a pretty good precedent in the story of one of the greatest Hebrew leaders, King David. But look at these two stories. Neither of them are really cases of extreme need, are they? I don't actually believe that the disciples were picking the corn because they were starving. They could have been no more than half a mile from a source of food: in fact, there's every possibility that they were very close to the homes of at least some of them. And they'd have had to pick an awful lot of corn if they really were trying to stave off the prospect of death.

And what about the man with the withered hand? It doesn't appear to have been life-threatening. I'm sure it was inconvenient, painful and limiting. It might probably have prevented him working for a living. But if this condition had brought him to the verge of death, he is unlikely to have gone along to the synagogue that morning. Jesus could quite easily have waited until the next day to heal him, if he'd wanted. If an inability to work had been the main problem, then Jesus could have turned up early in the morning (or, indeed, late that evening, after the sun had gone down and the Sabbath had ended, as in *1:32,33*) and healed him. Why cause such a fuss in the synagogue?

Well, as always, Jesus has a point to make. Here is another statement about the Kingdom of God, about the new order, the new age. Jesus is not negating the principle of the Sabbath. We read elsewhere that he does not see his mission as doing away with the Law. The fact that his spoken answers to the specific criticisms rely on exemptions which don't apply in these cases suggest that he is trying to press home a completely different message.

Partly he is reminding the people what the Sabbath is actually all about. The Sabbath, as a creation ordinance, as a universal principle for all humanity, is all about having a day of rest, recreation and redemption. It's a different day from the rest of the week, and in a culture where work to survive was an all-consuming necessity, the Sabbath was a time of respite from that. It was a day to do something different – and still is. The Sabbath, whether we choose to celebrate it (and it should be a celebration) on a Sunday or a Saturday or any other day of the week, is not to be a day of rules and regulations and repression. It is a resource to be used wisely, not a reason for gloom. Of course, in a society such as ours, it makes sense for everyone to celebrate it on the same day, or the idea of it being a different day begins to wear off and we retreat into some kind of individual, privatised expression of our lifestyle and religion where we do our own thing and don't care about anyone else. That's a powerful reason for keeping Sunday special.

But I don't think Jesus was rooting for one day over another here. Yes, there is the idea, as we've just said, that it's resource to be used gladly and wisely, not a straitjacket to burden us with rules and regulations based more on tradition than on Scripture. But it's in the second part of Jesus' words here that the real challenge lies. *V28* contains a play on words in Aramaic which doesn't translate into Greek or into English. I won't go into all the details this morning, but the argument goes something like this. (We need to take "*man*" to refer to all humanity, of course, but we'll stick with the old fashioned language, despite the charges of sexism which might be levelled against us, otherwise it all gets a bit cumbersome.) If the Sabbath is made for man, rather than the other way round, then, taking "*son of man*" to be another way of saying "human beings", man is the lord of the Sabbath. But we could also take "*son of man*" as being a way of saying "I" – which has some justification in ancient languages – and therefore Jesus is referring to himself, which is the way the NIV interprets it, as it capitalises the words.

In other words, Jesus is saying, "*So I am the Lord even of the Sabbath*" Now there's all kinds of stuff behind this, to do with what "*the Son of Man*" meant in Old Testament imagery and how we translate the specific words, but whether we take this as Jesus' self-referral or as an acknowledgement that Jesus is the

ultimate human being or whatever, the clear message is about the Lordship of Jesus. It is a challenge to the focus of the Pharisees and a challenge to our focus today.

What are we, as professed followers of Jesus, going to focus our thoughts on? Where do our priorities lie? Do we focus – as did the Pharisees – on rules, regulations, “proper behaviour”, dogma? Or do we focus on Jesus? Where is our allegiance – to the tradition of human beings and our own attempts to sort out what is important in life: or to Jesus the Christ and his new agenda for humanity? The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* encourages us to “*Fix[our] eyes on Jesus, the beginning and end of our faith.*” In other words, look at Jesus and you don’t need to look anywhere else.

What it boils down to is this: if Jesus is Lord, then we are freed from all the rest of the stuff which can so easily become burdensome to us. It’s another of those paradoxes which seem to be the basis for our faith. Acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus, adopting his agenda for life and sticking to it, actually means true freedom. Paul wrote about that to the Christians in Galatia in a letter trying to encourage them to stop getting bogged down in the traditions of Judaism and accept the grace and liberty of a transformed life following Jesus. In *Galatians 5:1* he writes, “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*”

Now that’s dangerous stuff, because we like to be told what to do, we like to have someone do the thinking for us and then we don’t have to accept the responsibility for the way we live our lives. That’s the attraction of fundamentalist religion for so many people today. We feel we need to know exactly how far we can go and there’s nothing better than a set of rules and regulations to give us the comfort and security of knowing that we’re doing the right thing. That was the attraction of the Pharisees. The trouble with that is, as Jesus says here about the Sabbath, you end up keeping all the rules, but forgetting why you’re keeping them.

And the temptation is for us, too, to say that once we’ve committed ourselves to following Jesus, we have the freedom to do exactly what we want. But this freedom is not licence. It’s not a “do anything you like” kind of freedom. It’s a freedom to choose to walk in the way that Jesus walks. Later on in that same letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love*” (5:13,14). Although we have that freedom from rules, regulations and dogma, there is still the imperative to compassion, there is still an ethical dimension to following Jesus.

“Look,” says Jesus to the worshippers in the synagogue and to the worshippers in Wade Street Church, “God’s given you this wonderful gift of time to relax and be refreshed. Don’t get bogged down in all kinds of rules about how you use it. I’m the one who really counts. Just like in any other area of your life, I’m the true Lord, the real focus. Lift your eyes up from all those humanly contrived constraints, which in themselves won’t bring you any closer to God, and look at me.” If you’re serious about following this man, you’ll find he leads you in the way you need to go – and somehow, he’ll be holding your hand as you go.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What’s your attitude to Sunday? How do you “celebrate” it? Why should we keep it special?
2. Is it right to impose Sunday observance on the whole community/nation? Why/why not?
3. Do you find rules and regulations a help or a hindrance? Why?
4. If Jesus turned up in our church next Sunday, what do you think he might criticise?

5. At what point does freedom become licence?
6. How can we “*keep our eyes fixed on Jesus*”?
7. What have you learned from this passage?