

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK:

2/6/2024: OS 9b

“BUREAUCRATS AND ADMINISTRATORS”

Mk 2.23-3.6 (NRSV)

23 One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’25And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ 27Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

3Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ 4Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. 5He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

On my last day of University (the first time) our wonderful Professor of Education , Brian Hill, invited the new graduates to his officed to give us his blessing (he was a faithful member of the Uniting Church) and give us a few words of advice. I’ll never forget one of the things he said:

“Those of you who are about to work for the Education Department are about to enter a bureaucracy and you will need to learn how to navigate through it. In such a bureaucracy you will meet bureaucrats and administrators. Bureaucrats are those who know all the rules to stop things happening; whereas administrators know all the rules to make things happen. Early on figure out which are which and work with the administrators!”

Little did I know that 5 years later I would be heeding his advice. Faced with honouring a call to ordination I had contemplate what to do with my teaching career. Unfortunately after only 5 years, I had not served the Education Department long enough to apply for Leave Without Pay. So I turned to the Teachers Union for advice (I was a member) and was told:

“Approach the Department and ask to speak to Mr X. He is second in charge of granting Leave. Don’t go to Mr Y who is the head. Mr X will give you a more favourable hearing.”

(Mr X was the bureaucrat and Mr Y was the administrator!)

And so, I went to see Mr X. When I explained that my reason for leave was to cautiously enter into ordination training in the Anglican Church, and that if it didn’t work out, I’d like my job back, he replied:

“Well isn’t that marvellous”.

How surprised I was!

Shortly afterwards, I was granted one year’s leave without pay. This was unheard of after just 5 years service in the Department.

Some years later I discovered that Mr X was a faithful member of the St George’s Anglican Cathedral Congregation in Perth!

The Lord works in mysterious ways!

Yes there are rules, but in my case, I guess Mr X saw that there was a higher calling at work!

Incidentally, I did not need my old job back!

In today’s reading the Pharisees face a similar problem. They knew the rules, better than most, but had fallen into the trap of bureaucracy. As the writer puts it, their hearts had been hardened against the hungry and the maimed. For them, the bureaucracy of Sabbath had wrongly overcome the administration of mercy. They had allowed the rules of the sabbath to stifle the kindness of healing. They failed to see that there was a higher calling at work. Healing, wholeness and blessing overrule the command for sabbath rest.

Jesus puts them in their place. His actions demands that the rule of “compassion” out trumps everything. He even gives a holy example from the scriptures they knew well. He reminded them that even King David distributed the holy bread to his starving companions – against the rules!

I’ve had this explained to me another way. In terms of the rules of AFL.

You may be aware that in AFL an umpire can over-rule a free kick by the “advantage rule”. This means that the Umpire can keep the game moving rather than stopping play unnecessarily. I believe there’s similar rule in netball to do with “contact”- but that’s not my area of expertise!

In the language of my old Professor of Education, Jesus is behaving as an administrator, and not as a bureaucrat. He side-steps the rules in favour of justice, mercy and compassion. Or as he puts it:

'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.' (Mk 2:27-28, NRSV)

But we must not be too quick in dismissing the Pharisees. In their minds, they thought they were being faithful. To them, the Sabbath is what gave the Jews their identity. From their point of view it was not so much the "Jews who kept the Sabbath", but the "Sabbath that kept the Jews".

Remember that under the Romans, the people were under the pressure of cultural annihilation. To keep peace with Rome was a simple matter of following certain Roman customs- like worshipping the Roman gods. Many nations around them had "become Roman" for the sake of peace. But not the Jews. The Romans would have them abandon the sabbath but to them that would be cultural suicide. There was much at stake!

Jesus, stance is not very palatable.

Some years ago I visited Bondi Beach on a Saturday morning. You may be aware that Bondi has a large Jewish community. As I took the long trek from the train station to the Beach, I passed many a faithful Jew heading to the Synagogue for worship. Then to my surprise the Jewish Bagel shop was opened for business! So after buying a bagel I enquired:

"How come your bagel shop is open on the sabbath?"

The proprietor then pointed to the power pole outside:

"See that wire up in the power pole? It runs around the suburb. Everything on that side of the wire is in sabbath, but on this side it's not!"

"Of course"

I said, understanding that this is a very Jewish way of thinking!

Or to quote a Rabbi I once knew:

"If coffee wasn't kosher, we'd find a way of making it so!"

I wonder if you are harbouring some rules, which if you think about it, are stopping the compassionate work of God? Rules, which on the face of it look good, but on deeper reflection, they restrict God. I'm thinking about "nit-picky" rules which stop the joy of life.

Think of a time when you have been "nit-picky". What was it about?

Were you trying to control someone else unreasonably?

Were you jealous that the other person was better off than you?

Were you just being plain mean?

Yes, we have to be careful. There are plenty of people who are withered by life. The last thing they need is someone who will wither their hope or crush their courage. Yes, there might be rules for good reason, but there may be a higher calling at work!

All of us can be nit-picky.

All of us are capable of stifling God's compassionate work.

Yet, all of us can learn from Jesus:

Not to turn back those who are withered by life;

and not to let rules get in the way of compassion.

And if you think about it the word *administrator* contains the word *minister*!

God does indeed work in mysterious ways!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.