

Mark 2:23- 3:6

Mark gets on with the job! His gospel is the shortest of the four. Right from the beginning, he wastes no time in unfolding the story of the good news of Jesus Christ in a series of steps which take us ever onwards and upwards to the glory of Jesus' resurrection and the commission for all believers to take the story on. This passage comes quite close to the beginning of it all, we're only a couple of steps up the "stairway to heaven" and already Mark has laid foundations which reveal that Jesus is the Son of God. Here, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, derived from the words of Daniel which his audience would know well. After calling his disciples, he has already shown his command over nature and sickness and the forgiveness of sins. In the verses just before this passage he announces that something new has come and the old forms of strict religious practice such as fasting are being superseded. And the custodians of those strict ways – the Pharisees - get right up his nose!

The two occasions here – the plucking of grain as you amble through a field and the healing of the man with the withered hand – both challenged these religious leaders of the day and called into question their interpretation of the Law handed down to Moses. Over the years they had developed an understanding which focused entirely on the letter of the Law rather than the spirit which the letter embodied. In fact, they had built up thousands of "letters" of the Law with a myriad of "does and don'ts" based on the literal words used in Exodus. And in doing so we all know now that they missed the point completely. But at the time, their detailed restrictions were to be followed without deviation come what may. The people were in chains, enslaved by the Law. Jesus broke those chains and continues to break any chains which we might experience, freeing us to be in glorious fellowship with God as He originally intended.

Many of the Laws given to Moses, supplementary to the ten commandments, are common sense hygiene, good neighbourly living and instituting a lifestyle in contrast to the nations surrounding the Hebrews. But here the focus is on reflecting an essential characteristic of the Creator God – the institution of the Sabbath day of rest. In that priceless saying of Jesus, "The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath" Jesus slices through to the spirit behind the law – the created life of humankind is not intended to be endless toil. Periods of rest and reflection and reconnection with our Creator are an essential part of what it is to be human. God himself led the way by resting from the work of creation when he had created humankind. The Genesis account is written in the form of a poem and should be interpreted as such – work, work, work, then rest and reflect and enjoy it – God saw that what he had done was good and blessed it. He took *time out* to bless what he had done. But slavishly conforming to an imposed day of "rest" isn't the answer either. Picking a few heads of grain hardly constitutes work which would get in the way of reflection. And healing – doing good rather than evil – is also a blessing in the day.

So how do we deal with the sabbath today? There are places in the world where the letter of the sabbath law is still strictly adhered to, even in Christian communities. If you visit the Hebrides islands, in the caravan park on the Isle of Lewis you will be warned not to hang out your washing on a Sunday! The Jews in Manchester travel by car to the synagogue sitting on a hot water bottle! It's forbidden to travel more than a certain distance on the sabbath unless you are traveling over water – technically aboard a boat but the letter of the law says, “over water”! Even in Lewis things are now less strictly enforced and here in Bridgetown, most people wouldn't hesitate to mow the lawn, dig the garden or construct a shed etc never mind hang out the washing. But would we? Should we? Is it OK to go to the IGA on a Sunday?

The words of Jesus here don't eliminate the special nature of the day of rest, the sabbath. Far from it! Although he says that the sabbath is not intended to enslave us, he does reinforce the idea that the sabbath day of rest was made for *us*, it IS special. We benefit from a day of rest. Rest and reflection, rebuilding and restoring our personal walk with God can most effectively be done when we free ourselves from the impositions life place on us during the other six days of the week. If we plan to do anything which stops that happening, we should probably think again. Rather, let's plan to do things which help us to walk closer with Jesus. Obviously joining together with others as the Body of Christ, reflecting on and celebrating the blessing of Jesus' death and resurrection can take prime place. But there may be other things we can do also – spend time with others, create space to read or just “be” in the spiritual presence of God, listen to music, look – really “look” – at some artwork, gaze on something beautiful - anything which our daily labours inhibit us from doing during the week. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture when we're busy, busy, busy with the minutia of life. Maybe the old saying comes to mind – “It's hard to remember you're meant to be draining the swamp when you're up your waist in alligators!” Maybe that's not entirely appropriate and it's a slight misquote anyway, but do you get the idea? The sabbath should be an opportunity to take a “top down” view of where we're at – to put our activities into context and revel in “the peace of God which passes all understanding”.

As we individually and consciously follow the spirit, not the letter, of the law each Sabbath, we will grow in grace and love. As we collectively and intentionally draw closer to Jesus we will more nearly function as the Body of Christ in this place, impacting the community in which we live. And as that happens, maybe we will find ourselves being something of an answer to a sentence in the prayer given to us by Jesus – “Your will be done on earth as in heaven.”

Amen.