

The Sabbath farce

Readings: Ex. 20:8-11 & Mark 2:23-3:6

It is Mother's Day today and my sermon could be related to mums.

You may have heard the phrase that a mother's work is never done. It could give the impression that mums work harder than dads... But dads do work – they are just more humble – it isn't seen as evidently. They clean most of the kitchen, pick up almost all the clothes in the bathroom, cover a huge percentage of the floor vacuuming...

A mother's work is never done is assuming a mother never gets a break. But I'm sure some mums get a break when others were sleeping...

The link between Mother's Day and the Sabbath could be quite profound.

Do you remember the days when nothing happened on Sunday? No sports. No work. There were absolutely no lawn mowers heard. Definitely no shopping. Even TV didn't come on till later on in the day.

It was the day of rest and for some utter boredom. Some went for the famous Sunday drive – going nowhere – just driving to pass the day. Others snoozed. What did you do on those days?

It is for some people – the good old days. For others it would drive them insane today. The government would loudly proclaim that the economic results of doing this today would be devastating.

But what happened a few decades ago was nothing compared to Jesus' day. There were very strict regulations on what people could and could not do. How far one could walk, how to look after one's livestock, what to prepare for meals and so on.

The Sabbath was a very important aspect of the Jewish faith. Perhaps far more than many of us realise. It was a point of difference from other religions and nations. It was something that was ordained by God himself. It was something that connected Israel with God in a very tangible way back to creation itself.

In the gospel reading this morning we see two events associated with the Sabbath – the disciples eating some grain and the healing of a man's hand. Both these stories are used to illustrate

something important to the reader. What do you think the message is?

Is it the hardness of the human heart?
Is it the issue with legality?
Is it the freedom of Christ?
Or is it something else??

The authorities didn't like what Jesus was doing in regards to the Sabbath because it was undermining the fabric of what they knew was utterly important to their religion and way of life. One does not work on the Sabbath – period. And we would be exactly the same if someone came in and undermined things we held on to as fundamental to our faith – I hope we would.

What is the writer trying to tell us? Is it the difference Christ brought to the interpretation of how God made the world compared to the interpretation of people? In other words the view point of people meant that if people suffered needlessly then so be it. The law was more important than people.

We see in the stories preceding the teachers of religious law having real issues with Jesus – first forgiving sins – only God can do that; eating with sinners – not a good look and now these Sabbath events.

The writer is showing Jesus living in a completely new and upsetting way for some people. The writer is driving home his point again and again with these episodes in Mark. Like the new wine skins – Jesus is bringing something new. But it isn't new really – it was always meant to be this way. It is not a new way, but the right way of looking at faith and life.

Jesus states that things like the Sabbath were to benefit people, not the other way around. The religious teachers got it quite wrong. This benefit isn't simply in keeping a law – but in what this law intended for people to attain – a deeper spiritual connection with God.

The law was to reflect God's nature and Israel was getting it completely wrong. God isn't about simply keeping laws for the sake of keeping laws. God is about life and the means to attain this life – which does include observing laws – but in a specific and life-giving way. Our actions create results in one way or another.

Law keeping was a means to an end, not the goal in itself and this is often the mistake people make

– even today – even in churches. Focusing so much on the law that they forget the law’s intention.

And it is amazing what people chose to support; what they will put up with in the name of religion or not. Sometimes people are so keen to uphold beliefs and statutes that they forget about the people.

Perhaps one of the problems for the church arose when people began to realise that the rules and regulations and expectations found in some churches wasn’t actually contributing much to their life. Perhaps it is why they found other things much more enjoyable than church itself.

Even good church goers today can be quickly lured from Sunday worship for any number of “good” reasons. And even though church worship isn’t the be all and end all of our faith isn’t it an important aspect of our faith?

And although today we focus far more on the grace of our faith, rather than the law. The law is seen in the Old Testament as superseded by the Grace in the New Testament. Even though Jesus himself declared that he had not come to take one iota away from the law (Mat 5:17).

And if we look at the Ten Commandments are there any items there we no longer need? I can’t see any there that are redundant today.

And so the question I want us to think about today is what has happened to our Sabbath – the seventh day – set apart as holy. How do we keep it holy? Not in a legalistic sense alone – but in a way that gives us life and deepens our faith.

There is this sense of rest – but it is also much more than this. The day is set apart as Holy! But what does this mean? How do we make this day Holy?

This is so important to understand because this is a fundamental aspect of our faith and our relationship with God and if we get it wrong isn’t there the very real possibility that it will affect our faith?

The Sabbath isn’t just about resting.
The Sabbath isn’t just about attending church.
The Sabbath isn’t just about a break from the usual things we do. It is so much more... it is holy!

The Sabbath is in fact a tremendously significant aspect of our faith that has the power to do vital care for our faith. It is set apart as holy.

Do you remember a time long ago when you were in love and perhaps you were away from your loved one for a week or month? And the anticipation of meeting each other grew until you met and you simply enjoyed being in each other’s company. There was delight and joy.

The Sabbath is a little like that – taking time out from the everyday to be with God. But perhaps what we forget is who God is – this incredible, awesome, majestic, wonderful being who loves us so perfectly. And that spending intentional life-giving time with God absolutely adds to our life like nothing else.

And we do this not in dead religious rituals or with a sense of onerous duty. We keep the Sabbath because it fills our life with goodness. Just like being with the person you love is something you would want to do.

How we keep the Sabbath holy is such an important question to ask ourselves. What will we do? Coming to church helps. Taking a break from the worldly things that occupy our others days is good. Taking time to ponder and reflect on your life is helpful. Enjoying the good things of life is a blessing God would approve of.

The reality is that we live in a world that is absolutely hostile to God. And whether we like it or not over time the world affects us and we need, WE NEED, to return to God in order to get right again and see what is truly important in this life. The Bible shows that one day in seven is how much we need.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems facing our church today is that we don’t keep the Sabbath as God requires. We have neglected it to the point that many don’t appreciate its utter importance. However the Sabbath is so essential that we need to take it seriously.

It is a day to reconnect to God, reinvigorate our life, remember what it truly important in this brief life we live, revitalise our call by God on our life.

The Sabbath can be a little like mums – easy to overlook sometimes. But their importance cannot be underestimated.