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Deuteronomy 5.12-15 p.150  
Mark 2.23-3.6 p.31  
2nd June 2024   
  
 Grace Based Tradition**

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ,   
the Living Word. So, in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.*  
Do you ever find yourself getting so worked up whilst listening to a debate or interview on the radio or TV that you actually join in!   
  
I did that the other day whilst listening to a favourite podcast. One of the presenters, a political journalist, was saying why he doesn’t, in his words, *do God.* He’d attended a carol service at Lambeth Palace and whilst he has a great deal of respect for the Archbishop, he senses that Justin Welby is trying to evangelise him. And his take is that to be a Christian you have to believe, to literally believe it all. Creation in seven days, a virgin birth, the miracles and a physical resurrection. None of it negotiable, none of to be interpreted with nuisance as myth stories, all of it completely and utterly literal. Doubt one part, and you’re out. His sister, he told us, is just such a believer and has told him if he doesn’t believe like her, then in her view he is going to hell.  
  
Well, it was at this point that I joined in, talking to the computer on which I was listening to the podcast. In fact, by now I was shouting, shouting that, in my view, no – you don’t need to believe everything literally and that faith can indeed be complex. The important thing is to keep asking the questions, keep exploring the stories, keep seeking after truth.   
  
So, when he said his conclusion was that he couldn’t believe in his sister’s sort of God, I joined in again, saying to my computer, because of course no one else was listening, n*o, I don’t believe in that sort of God either.* It’s occasions like these when I really hope the blood pressure tablets are doing their job!  
  
In today’s gospel we have the Pharisees present a picture of a rules-based God that Jesus emphatically rejects. Instead, he speaks of a grace-based tradition. Of course, he had to because in the minds of his critics Jesus was himself a law breaker, and on the two occasions described in today’s reading from Mark it was his Sabbath rule breaking that so upset the religious authorities.  
  
On one occasion Jesus seems to encourage his hungry disciples to pluck some ears of corn. To do that any other day would have been fine, but he was seen doing on the Sabbath. And, secondly, whilst worshipping in the temple one Sabbath Jesus heals a man with a withered arm. The result was an audible sharp intake of breath. Of all the things to do on such a special day, showing love and offering compassion by healing a man in need was not, apparently, one of them.

To the Pharisees Jesus is a law breaker.   
  
Tradition, of course, is both good and bad. If it is done because it’s rhythms still have meaning and purpose it can give depth and comfort. Yet if it’s simply performed by us going through a meaningless routine, with everything detached from its original intent, then it at best is just dry and dusty, and at worst is used negatively for purposes that were never intended.

These Pharisees *knew* the law. They certainly made a study of all that was *forbidden.*   
  
One commentator I read put it this way: *The Pharisees turned the Sabbath into a deadly and deadening day. The rules had become so important that even God had dropped out of sight, not to mention other people.*Perhaps it was when Jesus spoke of a certain authority when he said: *so, the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath* which really made them mad. Yet this was a grace-based position he was advocating. What really matters is not just going through the motions but living in a way that celebrates life and honours God by putting the wellbeing of neighbour first.

It's more than a little ironic that whilst the Pharisees refused to do a thousand things on the Sabbath, we are told that plotting to do away and kill Jesus wasn’t one of them. They could do that, they could conjure a *set up,* lure him to the temple knowing the one thing he could never refuse would be to help out a man in need, a man with the withered arm. And, as soon as they saw this act of compassion, their entrapment was complete. It was, in their eyes, as if Jesus had signed his own death warrant.

Is that the God we believe in? A rules-based deity who oversees the rituals of obligation. Or do we journey with the God who shows us a grace-based tradition?   
  
Now let’s be clear, our Jewish cousins also departed from this particular Pharisaic interpretation. One hundred years on from Mark’s gospel these words came into the Rabbinic tradition: *The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it.* And anticipating that maybe certain laws might well be needed to be broken to preserve life on occasions another saying from the 2nd century went like this: *Profane one Sabbath for a person’s sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths.* In other words if you have to work and break a hundred laws to stop a person dying on the Sabbath you have done a wonderful thing, enabling him to keep his life and celebrate many Sabbaths in the future.

And in many ways, that’s exactly what Jesus is saying here, one hundred years earlier.  
  
All faiths, especially ones with so called historic sacred texts, have to constantly revisit and re-interpret the injunctions in them.  
  
Well, Mark is great at giving our Lord two-line answers that today we might even call perfect soundbites. So, in Mark 2, Jesus says: *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.* And then at the temple: *Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good and save life, or to do evil and take life?*

Of course, we understand and appreciate the need for rules. Society needs them. Often, as a necessity, rules actually protect the weak against the strong. Rules are fundamentally about justice.  
  
Yet we all know that there are sometimes bad rules and unjust laws. It's why Parliament and the Courts are so critical for the well being of society. It’s why there’s always been a strong and essential connection between faith and politics. Indeed, on that podcast I was listening to, the presenter who *didn’t do God,* reluctantly admitted that the birth of the Labour Party had more to do with the Methodist Church than with Karl Marx. And that would be another interesting Life and Faith Group question with the word *discuss* after it.  
  
Jesus himself came from the tradition that gave the world the 10 Commandments. His home at Nazareth and those visits he made as a boy to Jerusalem, would all have been within the religious framework of the Torah. Even in his teaching ministry Jesus refuted the idea that he’d come to do away with The Law. Yet, in the words from the bible commentator I mentioned earlier, Jesus seems to willingly break any law or tradition in which *rules had become so important that even God had dropped out of sight, not to mention other people.*So, when he says *the Sabbath was made for us and not we for the Sabbath,* when he says *Is it lawful to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath*, it’s significant that Mark records in chapter 3 and verse 4: *They had nothing to say.*

There is a sense in which, when put like this, it was indeed self-evident.

And yet it hasn’t always felt so in the history of the Church. We took centuries to reform the place of women and value their ministries. We, the historic Church, led the fight against slavery only after decades of benefiting from the Atlantic Slave Trade. Even within our lifetimes we have known a certain stigma within the Church because of divorce or sexuality which surely has put rules ahead of people.  
  
Of course, because an honest life is always a messy one, all of these moral and ethical issues are a challenge that can rarely be addressed with simple binary, yes or no, answers.   
  
Mark says of Jesus, that he was both angry and sorrowful at the *obstinate stupidity*, those are the words he uses, of those around him who didn’t relish the joy of the Sabbath with its prospect of life affirming renewal, but who embellished it with so many petty rules that it became a day of burden instead of rest.

There is a warning there for us, and a challenge too.  
  
I love the story of Michael Ramsey, as Archbishop of Canterbury, presiding over the General Synod the day it voted not to join forces with the Methodist Church. It’s true that he had been a great advocate of the scheme, after all he had some non-conformist blood in him because his father had been a Congregationalist.   
  
The point is, when the vote was announced, and it became clear there were not enough Anglicans who wanted to join up with Methodists, some cheering started in Synod. Ramsey hated this response, this triumphalism, this idea of winning at someone else’s expense. He wanted a little more humility, the idea that they were treading on holy ground, and someone’s win meant another person’s disappointment and loss. So, he raised his hand and stopped the applause at Church House, and with words of wise and gentle rebuke, told the members that rather than applause he thought a moment of quiet prayer would be more appropriate.  
  
In our fast moving world today within an ever changing marketplace of ideas, we in the Church find ourselves having to reassess our traditions, our scriptures and our rules as we engage with the ethical and moral debates of our day. We too are on holy ground, and need a bit of humility, as we listen as well as speak.

Today’s reading offers us the example of Jesus who so valued people that he put them front and centre in his grace-based tradition. A tradition that is, essentially, loving rather than literal.

May the life and teaching of our Lord continue to help us walk a path through life on which neither God nor people drop out of sight.  
  
In the name of the one who, yes, on the Sabbath, fed his disciples and healed the man with the withered arm. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 21st May 2024*