

Holy Communion 8.00 and 10.30 June 2nd 2024.

Trinity 1

Deuteronomy 5.12-15, 2 Corinthians 4.5-12, Mark 2.23-3.6

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Every year, the readings that we have at communion services are based on one of the so-called synoptic gospels – either Matthew, Mark or Luke, with the gospel of John used on various occasions throughout each year. Our gospel for this year is Mark, and it was used as the basis for our readings from Advent through to Easter. There is quite reliable evidence, at least to my mind, that the gospel is based on the eyewitness account of the disciple Peter, as told to the gospel writer John Mark, and thus the train of transmission of the accounts is quite short. It is very terse and direct, with none of the complex prose of John's gospel, and its purpose, set out in its first verse is to present "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Along with the other synoptics, Mark doesn't give a strictly chronological account of the life of Jesus. It has a basic framework, which begins with the events early in Jesus's ministry – the baptism, temptation, calling of the disciples, the transfiguration, passion and crucifixion. But otherwise Mark groups different incidents largely thematically, puts together blocks of Jesus' teaching and his parables and so on.

We see that with the stories in our reading today which are from Jesus' Galilean ministry. Galilee at the time was under the control of one of the Herod's, a client ruler of Rome, based at his city of Sepphoris, which Jesus and his disciples seem to have deliberately avoided. This was perhaps wise as John the Baptist clearly didn't and lost both his head and his life as a result. Our readings today both centre on the observance, or otherwise, of the Sabbath day. The common theme that comes through them is of growing opposition to Jesus, particularly amongst the religious establishment. And in some ways these readings are quite direct and straightforward. In the first, Jesus and his disciples are walking through fields on the sabbath day and they plucked heads of grain and ate them. The watching Pharisees, who seem to have been everywhere, accused them of breaking the commandment not to do any work, that we read in our first reading. This simple law was apparently given thirty-nine sub clauses in the religious regulations, and grinding grain was one of the things that was prohibited even, apparently, between your fingers. Jesus countered with the story of David and his companions, whilst on the run from Saul, who were hungry and had taken the bread of the presence, that was consecrated each day and laid before the altar (and was later consumed by the priests) – a bit like us snacking on the communion wafers from the aumbrey. On a very simple level, this would have been very difficult for the Pharisees to challenge, given the reputation of David, shocking as they may have found the story, but Jesus used it to remind them of what was behind the sabbath teaching – it was a gift of God to humanity for rest and relaxation, and not meant to be something burdensome, and that religious scruples were outweighed by human need. Then finally Jesus makes a reference to the figure of the "Son of Man". At this stage in the ministry of Jesus, this would have been puzzling. The Son of Man appears in the

book of Daniel, as a figure that approaches God in Heaven (the Ancient of Days) and receives from him power and authority to rule the world. On the other hand, “son of man” is used in the psalms, simply as a description of humanity. “What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou doest care for him”. It is mysterious enough in its original contexts, and doubly so here. Over his ministry, Jesus used this phrase, less and less ambiguously as time went on, to refer to himself. Commentators disagree with each other as to what he meant by it – simply a rather long-winded way of referring to himself as just another man like everyone else, or as identification with the Daniel figure. And perhaps Jesus intended this ambiguity. But it would perhaps have been something to irritate the more theologically minded amongst his opponents just a little bit more.

The second event takes place at some other time and place in Galilee. Jesus went into a synagogue on a sabbath and was aware that he was being watched – his opponents were now actively seeking to find something to incriminate him. Also in the synagogue was a man with a withered hand. And we read that Jesus was angry and grieved with those who seemed to oppose him doing God’s work. Whatever, Jesus called the man over, and then challenged his watchers about whether it is lawful to do good or harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill. The question was one that they couldn’t answer without some degree of self-contradiction. So they were silent. And Jesus duly healed the man’s hand. The result of Jesus’ actions was that the Pharisees resolve to destroy him was strengthened – he was becoming too dangerous, too disruptive to their religious power and perhaps to their settlement with the secular authorities that allowed them to practice their religion. They went and started conspiring with that secular power, the Herodians (who they most certainly should not have associated with, particularly on the sabbath). The religious Pharisees and secular, Romanised Herodians were very odd bedfellows, but with a common need to eliminate anything that might disturb the status quo on which their prosperity depended.

These stories as such play an important part in Mark’s narrative, describing the developing opposition to Jesus’ ministry that was ultimately to lead to his death and execution and also give us early insights about his teaching and perhaps how he saw himself – as the Son of Man. But they also of course have immediate application to this day and age. The first of the stories suggests that care is needed not to let the minutiae of our faith dominate over the things that are actually important. And this is something we always need to bear in mind. There are more important things than the hymns we sing, the precise nature of the liturgy we use, how clergy dress up etc. In the life of the church there are always controversies which come and go. Currently we are faced with major issues on sexuality and safeguarding for example. And these are important and need to be addressed – but they shouldn’t be allowed to distract from the fundamentals of what we are about – spreading the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, in word and service to others. Interestingly, this temptation to concentrating on the trivial can be seen in the work of some commentators on the reading itself. You will have noticed that Jesus talks about the incident of David and the Bread of the presence being at the time of the High Priest Abiathar. Well, according to the story in the book of Samuel, this was simply not the case – the event occurred when Ahimalech, Abiathar’s father was High Priest. So something has gone awry in the chain of transmission here – perhaps in different versions

of the text, or the remembrances of Jesus, Peter or Mark. But some commentators spend an inordinate amount of time on this in comparison to the rest of the passage, either trying to defend biblical inerrancy, or trying to show scriptural fallibility. But in actuality it doesn't matter, and the wiser commentators just raise the point and then move on to what does matter, that what is important, in this case the recognition that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath, and the meeting of human needs.

Secondly, I think too, the story of the disciples in the field warns us against taking what is good - in the case of the Pharisees, the gift of the law, and turning it into something repressive and legalistic. And again, these is a trend to which we are prone. In another life, I am the webmaster for the Black Country Society, and run what we call the Virtual Heritage Group - an online series of meetings for those who can loosely be called part of the Black Country diaspora, of which I am a part. We normally get between 30 on 50 folk on our monthly Zoom meetings - all welcome (end of advert). Our most recent meeting was a "bring and share" of Black Country memories. One of the group made a brief presentation that he entitled "Sundays is for church" in which he described his Black Country childhood where on Sundays there were wall to wall church activities (in this case the Methodist chapel) - morning and afternoon Sunday Schools, Morning and Evening services, after service youth groups, to which he was expected to go. And if he didn't there was absolutely nothing else to do and he was expected to remain in the house. All good and worthy things, but in reality, things that came to oppress and for many to destroy faith. Not that that was his fate however - he retired recently after spending the final years of his career as the superintendent minister of the entire Methodist Church in the south west. We need to be careful not to make God's good gifts to us legalistic and oppressive.

The second reading of Jesus in the synagogue warns us too about calling what is good, bad - as the Pharisees called the acts of love and mercy on Jesus's part law breaking and sinful. I wonder sometimes if this is the unforgivable sin against the Spirit that Jesus talks of elsewhere - the hard-hearted naming of the acts of a loving God as bad and sinful. We as Anglicans do tend to be rather snooty about styles of worship that we find a bit over enthusiastic and OTT, even though it is clear that such worship brings Jesus alive to many. Maybe we just need to think about how weird it seems to others to see Anglican ministers dressed up in what was the formal wear of Roman Senators, enveloped in clouds of incense. Similarly, and more seriously, in our current debates in the church, there is an unfortunate tendency to regard the arguments of one side as wholly good and those of the other as wholly bad. Great care is needed here in our discussions to acknowledge the good, even through apparent contradictions.

But it seems to me that there is a deeper resonance with our times on this reading. Basically, we see in the readings the clash of two worldviews, and maybe three if we include that of the Herodians. World views that were fundamentally opposed - the world view of first century Pharisaic Judaism, centred on the observance of the Torah, and the world view of Jesus, if that phrase is indeed appropriate, based on the coming of the Kingdom of God. And the line taken by the Pharisees was hostile - to seek conflict, to exclude, to ultimately resort to violence. In our current society we see this play out in the same way all too often, particularly in the cess pits of social media - in our ongoing

elections and across a range of other contentious issues, where different views lead to insults, cancellation of others and threats of if not actual violence. Here perhaps the role of the church is ultimately to follow the example of our Lord – he was not afraid to speak the truth, or indeed get angry, but ultimately his approach to those that differed with him was to turn the other cheek and walk the way of the cross – the way ultimately of redemption and reconciliation. And as hard as it can be the church's role, our role should be that of reconciler between opposing parties. We get a hint of this in our epistle reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Here he describes how he himself has been under personal attack for his preaching of the gospel, in his typical and perhaps OTT style, but how he intends to do whatever it takes to continue to preach the gospel, to walk the way of the cross if necessary and to bring reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, God and humanity. And that perhaps serves to remind us of the primary purpose of the gospel of Mark - to make known the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The teaching we can take from these quite straightforward stories can be profound and life changing, but ultimately, they present us with a picture of Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and challenge us to follow him as his disciples.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy spirit. Amen