

Trinity 1, 2 June 2024, Year B:

Mark 2.23 - 3.6, Deuteronomy 5.12-15, Psalm 81.1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

On this First Sunday after Trinity Sunday we begin by reminding ourselves of the importance of the Sabbath commandment and its observance as a marker of freedom given its link to what God says at the beginning of the Ten Commandments as stated in the Book of Deuteronomy, 'I am the Lord your God, **who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**' continuing immediately with the First Commandment 'you shall have no other gods before me.' In the Psalm we also hear God speak as in the Ten Commandments, but centuries later and this time to the leader of the Temple choir who writes, 'I heard a voice I had not known.' Through this comment the choir leader acknowledges that the voice of God was no longer a voice that was heard by the people God had rescued. God's voice had become an unknown voice even to those who sang God's praises. They had forgotten who brought them their freedom.

'I relieved your shoulder of the burden;  
your hands were freed from the basket.'  
In distress you called, and I rescued you;  
I answered you'

and

I am the Lord your God,  
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.  
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

God is saying I am a God who in the past has looked favourably upon you, has acted on your behalf, has freed you from bondage in Egypt having first 'relieved your shoulder of the burden, your hands were freed from the basket'. And God implies that even now all the leaders and the people need to do is open their mouths and God will feed them. This directive will remind some of a much loved collect.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: **Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them**, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

This vivid collect helps us to see that God's word, as well as his actions are food indeed, but as always we must first open ourselves to this provision by keeping before us that it is God, who relieves the shoulder of the burden and frees hands from carrying the basket. A God who answers those in distress who call on him. A God who is known as a God of liberation from the desires and devices of our own hearts.

And so we arrive at today's Gospel reading, which is about the keeping of the Sabbath. Keep in mind the Commandments are all linked to God's action, who freed the people of Israel from the bondage they endured in Egypt, the Exodus. The Commandments are linked to freedom. Is this their deeper purpose, to fill the much touted concept of freedom with meaning? To sever the Commandments' link to God's action and freedom will lead to distortion.

The setting of the first snapshot taken by Mark is always for me is one of tranquillity, but it will soon be disturbed. There will be turbulence. I imagine the day for myself as being sunny and comfortably warm but not hot early in May. The grain is tall in the fields and the heads of the grain are ripe for plucking, as Jesus and his disciples make their way to the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath observed by some Pharisees, a popular movement within first century Judaism, who have become interested in Jesus and his disciples and in fact unsettled by them. One of the fault lines between Jesus and the Pharisees is how to keep the Sabbath, the day of rest. It is a day as Jesus points out given for humankind, who are made in the image of God. He says, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ...' The Sabbath is a day when we lay

down our tools. All our to share in the rest of the day even the stranger as well as the animals. All are to be partakers in the gift of rest.

Jesus here isn't questioning the importance of the Sabbath, but saying how it is to be observed/interpreted, while also making it clear that his authority is unlike the authority of the Pharisees and that he too knows the Scriptures. Have you forgotten what David did at the time of the High Priest Abiathar? The keeping of the Sabbath has its validity. We should be Sabbath formed people because we are a Spirit filled people. The Sabbath is a day of remembrance. It is a day when people are restored. It is day when people are free from labour that restoration may take place. It is day when the bondage to work is set aside.

Here it is fundamentally important to emphasise that work is something positive in its different forms as we read in the Book of Genesis, 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.' (2:15) This short statement coming before what is termed the Fall should be noted and held close. Synonyms for the verb 'to till' should it be unfamiliar are 'to farm, to plough, to dig, to turn over, to turn up, to break up, to loosen, to prepare, to fertilize, to plant'. Part of our God given vocation giving purpose and structure to our lives is 'to till and keep'. It is to cultivate and to maintain. It is a call to work.

This may be a stretch, but I want to link 'the Lord took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep' one, to Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Spirit and two, to the disciples and their companions being driven by the Spirit into streets of Jerusalem at Pentecost which is to be driven into another wilderness. Spirit filled people are also driven into places and situations, often resembling a wilderness, where the word of God is to be lived out, is to be spoken into connecting with the tilling and keeping of Genesis 2. This

juxtaposition of tilling and keeping is important. Yes, we are to till, but we are also to maintain. In agriculture this has been done for example by the rotation of both fields and crops, as well as allowing a field to lie fallow every seven years to recover and partake in the Sabbath rest. From this we also acquire the idea of sabbatical which indirectly through our prosperity has led to maternity leave and educational leave. Both to be celebrated and affirmed.

Being made in the image of God, who rested on the seventh day we too are called to rest. For us the Sabbath is Sunday the First Day of the Week, the Day of Resurrection, the Eighth Day. On The Christian sabbath we are to reflect on what we have achieved, what we have 'created' during the week so that we may come to echo in some small way words from the Book of Genesis, 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' If it isn't good to acknowledge what is amiss and make amends. Have we built up or torn down. Have we listened well and spoken wisely. Or have we spoken much and spoken foolishly. What does the Psalmist ask, 'Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.' (Psalm 141:3)

The Sabbath is about freedom. Rest is a gift. It is divinely sanctioned. Rest in many cultures is reserved for the wealthy. The protection of workers' rights remains important. A good attitude towards work is important. And as Christians how we go about our work, our professionalism, our respect and our care of our fellow workers bears witness. Many would find it difficult to work for some organisations often civic ones where over years a bad work ethic has evolved. Similarly, it would be difficult for many to work with people who personally have an unhealthy work ethic and rest ethic. Striking the balance the gift of the wise?

I see that I have reached my word limit without spending much time reflecting with you on 'The man with a withered hand' coupled with Jesus' observation as recorded by Mark. 'He looked at them with anger; he was grieved by their hardness of heart.' Suffice it to say that acts of mercy are not for tomorrow or the day after. And that man who has his hand restored is also being restored to the economic society of his day. He also restored to the command of tilling and maintaining. He is restored to community. Acts of mercy are always now as we look to The Lord of the Sabbath in whom we are to find our freedom which embraces rest as captured in another collect, in your service is perfect freedom. So be it. **Amen.**

NOTES for the Reader concerning David in this Markan passage

Jesus' response to the Pharisees by referring to David and David's alleged sacrilege during the time the high priesthood of Abiathar needs a little explaining. Suffice it here to say that since the time of the Exodus the people of Israel placed twelve loaves on an altar before the Holy of Holies, a space symbolising the presence of God, on the Sabbath as a thanksgiving offering for their liberation and for being under the wing of God. Twelve loaves because of the twelve tribes of Israel. These twelve loaves were known as the Bread of the Presence or as the showbread. They were set aside. They were special. They were only to be consumed by Aaron and his sons and later by their descendants. (Leviticus 24:8–9) Through the twelve loaves the people symbolically bring themselves into the presence of God at all times that God might not forget them and they be present to Him through the loaves made of the choicest wheat freely given. It is this bread, this sacred bread that David and his companions eat. By calling on this incident and comparing himself to David, who was held in high esteem and still is, despite his foibles goes on to pronounce that he The Son of Man (an emphatic I) is the Lord even of the Sabbath. Jesus scandalises the Pharisees. These statements contribute to Mark's conclusion of today's gospel, 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.'