

Bible Meditation

Saturday 8 Sept, Synod

Luke 6:1-5

A Sabbath controversy

One Sabbath

in the gospels it's always ominous when the phrase 'one sabbath' or 'it was the sabbath' appears. It's usually a signature for conflict brewing or breaking out in often violent ways. How often in the gospels Jesus is accused of being a Sabbath breaker and thus disobedient to God's law.

while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them.

Maybe you have rubbed some heads of grains and enjoyed the sensation of chewing them. I know I did as a boy. It's an innocent enough action but apparently, they have been observed.

² But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?"

Sabbath was the day of rest and there were quite elaborate and detailed rules about what might contravene rest for pious Jews. In the best sense the Jewish Sabbath rest echoed God's joy in the goodness of creation and hence the injunction to 'keep holy the sabbath'. It's a positive command not a negative. But how did you determine what was 'rest' and what was 'work'? It's not an issue about stealing but about transgressing one of the forty categories of activities deemed to be 'work'. We might feel at first sight it's surely splitting hairs; entirely unreasonable and frankly nit picking. Christians observance of Sunday has until the 1960's been regarded as a day of rest and observed for the most part in this spirit. When I was growing up in a country town in the Hunter Valley soccer gala days were introduced on Sundays. My brothers and I weren't allowed to play on gala days. I

still remember the Sunday my youngest brother got on his bike and rode down to the local police boys club where his team was playing. He was the goalie and there was no way he was going to miss out. We secretly cheered him on and then not long after witnessed my parents drive down to the club and pull him out of the goals – I think they lost. My parents took the law of Sunday rest absolutely seriously in those days. Now you'll be in trouble if you don't turn up for a sport on Sunday. The famous 1 miler Eric Liddell (of chariots of fire fame) wouldn't compete on Sundays. So, we need to think twice before we too quickly see the speck in the Pharisees. We've all got a bit of them in us; if only we could see it.

³Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”

I find it interesting that although the accusation is made towards the disciples Jesus comes to their defence. He is their advocate and post resurrection it is the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit who is the advocate who comes to the defence and support of the body of Christ in the world. Today we call upon this same Spirit.

Have you not read.... Here is Jesus' implied rebuke of the interpreters of the Torah. They are ignorant of their own tradition. We too are often selective with the facts as it suits. We need the wider body to find the fullness of truth; it cannot be captured by any particular group because of the tendency for partisan interpretations which need to be open for public discernment.

What David did with his companions..... It's not simply that Jesus points to a biblical precedent for the actions of the disciples.

⁴He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?”

The story is recounted in 1 Samuel 21: David and his companions ate the bread placed before the Lord in the Temple.

What is really provocative is the fact that Jesus draws a direct analogy between David and his companions and Jesus and his disciples. Such presumption; such assurance; such audacity; a dangerous move indeed. But it picks up the angel's promise to Mary that Jesus would inherit the 'throne of his father David'.

And took, and ate and gave.....Luke adds 'took' to Mark's account.

Immediately you sense anticipations of gestures of Luke's account of the Last Supper – Jesus takes, gives thanks, breaks and gives. Luke is a theologian and historian. He crafts his account of Jesus' life and as he does so he is a member of the post resurrection community of faith. So Luke is shining the torch of faith back into history to understand what was going on in the events of Jesus' ministry.

⁵Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

Luke omits the Mark reference 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'. On the other hand, he is abrupt and emphatic.

Conclusion

The reading today continues the Sabbath controversies in Luke and Mark. The Pharisees and to some extent the scribes emerge even more clearly as the arbiters of piety.

Who are the modern day arbiters of piety? Of course, there are always those of the Church with eyes and ears alert to transgressions; able to sniff out a heresy from 3 kms! And often the church has been wilfully blind to its own genuinely serious transgressions; but quick to point to failures of ethical and moral kinds in society at large.

It is also instructive to observe what I would call a rising secular moralism that infects our public life; the arbiters of an often cruel secular piety.

Our gospel reading alerts us to the problem of ends and means. Sabbath observance in the time of Jesus was for a purpose; a life lived orientated to the glory of God. This is the great end of all things. How sad, how destructive when the means becomes the focus rather than the end. And it is imperative that we remember the ends don't *justify* the means; rather the ends *determine* the character and spirit of the means. If the end is God's glory then the manner in which we travel towards that end has to be one that gives glory to God; the manner of the journey has to be in accord with the end.

Finally, the reading today draws a line in the sand regarding Jesus as an authoritative interpreter of the Torah and as the One who is Lord of the Sabbath – the One to whom Sabbath points; the One to whom the Sabbath bears its true praise. To this only true and wise God and be glory now and forever.

Amen.