

21st August 2016. Luke 13
Sermon by Philip Cullingworth.

Lord we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us

In our gospel reading this morning we meet Jesus clashing again with the Pharisees. We tend to think of the Pharisees as baddies, always getting the wrong end of the stick with Jesus and getting everything wrong, but I think that's a bit unfair.

So, today I'd like to look a little bit at what the history was behind the Pharisees and this issue of healing on the Sabbath, then at what Jesus had to say about the matter, finishing with looking at what does this mean to us in the 21st century.

History of the Sabbath and Pharisees

Let's start with the Sabbath. The first mention of a day of rest comes in the creation story. God has spent 6 days creating everything then we are told that on the seventh day he stopped working and then "He blessed the seventh day and set it apart as a special day" (Gen3:2).

Later, after rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, he provided food for them in the desert, manna, which appeared for 6 days each week, but not on the seventh. Finally when Moses received the 10 commandments from God, the Israelites were commanded to "Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy" (Gen 20:8). The Israelites were instructed that they were to do no work on the Sabbath, nor were their servants or slaves, it was to be a day for everyone to stop.

In fact, the very name, Sabbath, comes from the old Hebrew word for Stop or Rest, sabat. This also gives us the word Sabbatical, the extended break every 7 years that vicars have, resting from the work of running a parish.

It was to be a regular reminder that they were in a covenant with God and a time for them to focus on what that meant in their lives.

Throughout their history the Israelites were reminded to keep the Sabbath holy, our first reading was one of these reminders and comes with the promise of honour and enjoying the land. This reading comes at the end of a section about the way God really wants his people to act when fasting, not purely as an outward sign of religiosity while continuing to do whatever they want, but making a change, "putting an end to oppression" as our first reading stated. Isaiah is reminding people that the Sabbath ought to be the same, an inward change of heart not just outward acts.

So what about the Pharisees? Well, the Israelites did not change, continuing to break their covenant agreement with God, and in the end God sent them out of the land of Israel in what is known as the exile. After about 50 years they were allowed to return to Israel and some of them decided that they never wanted it to happen again. They had been exiled because they had broken God's commandments, so they were going to do something about it. They started adding extra rules so that if these rules were kept then there would be no chance of breaking the commandments.

Its a bit like a fence along the top of a cliff, set back from the edge. If you don't cross the fence, there is no chance of falling over the edge of the cliff.

By Jesus' time, the protectors and experts in these laws had become a group in their own right, the Pharisees. They were in fact generally the wealthier people, since keeping all their rules required far more time than a working person could manage, and they spent their days discussing the finer points of the rules. Some of these rules were, naturally, about how to avoid breaking the Sabbath law.

They had been commanded not to work on the Sabbath and so they had created a whole range of rules that defined what was considered working and regulated what could and could not be done on a Sabbath.

A very brief summary of the rules they had developed was that in addition to their weekday work, anything that created or exercised control over their environment was prohibited. Orthodox Jews today continue to observe these rules.

I can never think about this topic without remembering the time I went to Israel with a previous company that I worked for. One of the prohibitions that modern orthodox Jews will observe is that they are not to switch anything electrical on or off during the Sabbath. I was staying in a hotel and in a lift on the way to my room noticed a sign saying that this was the Sabbath lift. On the Sabbath, that lift would run continually and stop at every floor on the way up or down. This was so that orthodox Jewish guests at the hotel would not have to "Work" by selecting which floor they wanted the lift to stop at since it would stop at every floor automatically.

The Pharisees had started with good intentions, but they had got to the stage where keeping the letter of their rules had overridden God's intention behind the laws. This is why Jesus had so many clashes with them and used such scathing words about them.

Jesus' response

Jesus has already classed with the Pharisees about the Sabbath before this story. One Sabbath when he and his Disciples were walking through a field feeling hungry they picked a few ears of corn to eat. To the Pharisees this was forbidden since it constituted reaping, but Jesus replies that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

The Pharisees' rules would have had no problem with Jesus healing the woman the following day (or after the sun had set) since that would then not have been the Sabbath. If the woman's injuries had been life threatening they would have had no problems. Their problem was that it was a non-life threatening injury that Jesus cured on the Sabbath. They had missed the point of the Law. Jesus saw people as far more important than rules.

Jesus' response however went deeper. He pointed out that their rules treated animals better than people. Their rules allowed them to help an animal, to take it out of the stable and water it, but would not allow them to help another person. This woman was suffering and was in the presence of Jesus. Whatever the day of the week, Jesus was going to relieve the suffering of a fellow human.

Jesus did not say that the rules of the Pharisees were necessarily wrong, he would have grown up learning and living under them, but he was saying that their interpretation of them was wrong if they were going to get angry about a good deed done to a woman that had been crippled for so long just because of when it had been done.

Our Response

That's all very well, but what does it mean to us, today and in our 21st century lives?

The first thing I want to say is a reminder about the root of the word Sabbath, to stop or to rest. The Sabbath is a time to stop our normal daily chores, it was given as a day to relax and take a break from the regular things that we do during the rest of the week.

It was not just given as a day to rest and do what we want, but as our first reading said, but it was also given as a day to be honoured, a time to focus on our relationship with God and family. Taking time out from our hectic schedules means that we have a chance to spend quality time with God, joining with other Christians at church, reading the bible, taking time to pray and listen to God. We also have a chance to get together with friends and family to catch up and enjoy each other's company.

But we have to make sure that we don't become legalistic and fence it round with too many rules as the Pharisees did. For instance, it is ideal to avoid shopping on the Sabbath, but sometimes there is no alternative. Sometimes work *will* intrude into our Sabbath. These things happen occasionally, but we should strive, where we have control, to avoid them.

The final thing I would like to say is that our Sabbath will not always be a Sunday. As a church leader, it's not uncommon to have to work on a Sunday, but a Sabbath day is important and so needs to be worked in on some other day. As an example, John's day off is Thursday. If you work shifts it might be difficult to find a single day that works every week, so it may be that you have to have a

flexible Sabbath day.

It may be that as a carer or single parent it is very difficult to find a day when you can stop and switch off. In this case, the best you can do is to try to find what time you can. Remember Jesus said that "the Sabbath is made for man". The idea is that Sabbath rest will allow for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual renewal on a regular basis. If that's 1 day in 7, 1 year in 7 or 1 hour in 7, take what you can and trust God to bless that time.

Amen.