

Sunday 22nd May 2022
Easter 6 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 16.9-15
NT: Revelation 21.10,22-22.5
G: John 5.1-9

Today's Gospel is a straightforward healing miracle. Jesus sees a man who has been ill for 38 years, and Jesus says to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." It's more than any of us could do, but in the general narrative of the Gospels it is hardly unusual! And at the end of today's Gospel there is a typical line saying that the man took up his mat and began to walk. Then it suddenly says, "Now that day was a Sabbath." It's an enigmatic line which could easily have been left out of the reading, but it is important. We know that elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus is berated by the Pharisees for healing people on the Sabbath, and here he does it again. What could possibly be wrong with that, we might ask. But for the Pharisees and for all those who interpret the law strictly, even the work of healing is breaking the Sabbath law. In modern orthodox Judaism, lives are saved on the Sabbath, but routine medical treatment is less likely to happen.

But what is special about our Holy Day in this country? What does not happen on Sundays which happens on every other day? It is true that there are often fewer staff in the hospitals, but not significantly fewer staff. Healing goes on as well as saving lives. And outside hospitals? Well, the shops are open, people are working, and in many cases it is very difficult to see how Sunday is different from any other day.

You may feel that this is a terrible thing in modern Britain. You may feel that the loss of the Sabbath is a bad thing, or you may not care (and which of us has not been into a shop to buy something on a Sunday?), but ultimately we all have to live with Sundays as they are, because

that is where society is at the moment. The world moves on, and for good or for ill, we have to move with it.

Now the morality which we see in that line at the end of the Gospel, the morality which enforces a strict Sabbath code, is out of date and perhaps largely irrelevant to us because its context is so far removed from our own. And this highlights one of the problems of modern Christianity, that our morality can become confused and caught between a biblical model and a model defined and taught by secular society. Just because all of the shops are open on a Sunday does not mean that the lack of any effective Sabbath in this country is a good thing, and nor does it mean that the Church should no longer teach any guidance about how we observe the Sabbath. But at the same time, the fact that there was a Jewish Sabbath which was kept in Jesus' time according to the Law does not mean that we are bound to keep a Sabbath in such a strict way 2000 years later. Nor does it mean that the Sabbath has to fall on the same day of the week for each of us.

If you ask people on the street about their perceptions of the Church and Christians, you will very often find that the image they have is of an organization which sets rules and regulations and prescribes how people should behave. Sometimes this is true. But the basis on which Christians make their moral decisions is often rather unclear. I remember once discussing with a senior and slightly conservative bishop the debate in the worldwide Anglican communion about human sexuality, and his view was very straightforward. He said that whatever your personal opinion, it was terrible that non-Christians saw the Church getting increasingly obsessed by an issue which was no longer an issue for the majority of people in this country. He was right, of course, because the only thing which ever hit the headlines about the Church was on this one issue, whereas really we should be

concentrating on proclaiming the Gospel message.

But the debate about human sexuality encapsulates the problem which Christians have with all debates about morality: teaching on issues in the Bible is either non-existent or is written in a context far removed from our own. On the other hand, our own context often proclaims a morality with which many Christians are uncomfortable. Even the morals of our secular society are now different from how they were 50 years ago: we can't say that they are necessarily any better or any worse – they are just different. So how do we resolve this problem? How do we establish an acceptable code by which we should live, a code understood in the light of our faith? Clearly we cannot use the Bible as a manual which will answer our moral questions for us, especially those questions which only seem to have emerged in the context of life in the 21st century.

But perhaps the Bible is still the place to look for our morality. It is not the moral equivalent of the Highway Code, but Scripture still speaks to us. If you read the Bible from beginning to end, you will be struck not by instructions on how to live, but by its catalogues of failures and disputes. From the first disobedience in the Garden of Eden, right the way through the Old Testament and its lurid tales of misguided rulers, and then into the New Testament and those who came into conflict with Jesus because they didn't like his associations with tax collectors and sinner, and then into the New Testament epistles which are full of tales of arguments between the churches, the Bible is not a record of how to live, but perhaps rather how not to live. Even that great code given in the Book of the Exodus – the Ten Commandments – is hardly a list which is followed by the characters which populate the Bible.

But shining through it all is a common purpose, and perhaps this is the only timeless morality we can truly draw from the Bible. The common purpose is about making right the relationship with God. There are many who stray from that relationship, but from the first moment that the relationship is broken and Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, there are those who are trying to make the relationship right again.

The difficulty for us is that there is no set way for us to make right our relationship with God. In the Old Testament we find some trying to make amends with God by sacrifice or other attempts to honour God. In the New Testament, even though they are not portrayed in a positive way, even the Pharisees who criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath are in fact trying to make right the relationship with God by detailed following of the rules of the Jewish Law. And that should be our guide for moral living. The Bible and still less the Church is not in a position to make a comprehensive list of things you must or must not do in order to live a moral life, but moral living is about being right with God. That is the same now as it was 2000 years ago, but the challenges of our lives – the means by which we make ourselves right with God – are unmistakably different from 2000 years ago.

Healing on the Sabbath does not seem to us to be a particularly heinous crime, but some people today would still see a trip to the supermarket as an abuse of the Sabbath. Perhaps as we explore our own morality and the morality of those around us, we should be better guided by whatever it is that restores us to God's favour, whatever it is which draws us personally into a closer relationship with God. That can be the only judge of what is right and what is wrong.

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