**Mark 2:23-28**

**What is The Sabbath?**

August is a very quiet time for us at St. Andrew’s: the midweek services go down to a skeleton level, the children and families work stops, the choir takes a break, I don’t book any meetings except in emergencies. Everything goes on hold for about 6 weeks.

And I think it’s absolutely right for that to happen, because we all need a break. This is a busy church with a lot happening and it is good to step off the Merry-Go-Round for an extended period so that we can all recharge our batteries. But it’s also good to stop all the activities so that we can change the pace and rhythm of our spiritual lives for a while and spend more time thinking and praying rather than doing. It’s what we might call a Sabbath Rest.

And Jesus was talking about the Sabbath in this passage that we have just heard read from Mark’s Gospel. Now, I think the idea of the Sabbath is one of the most misunderstood in Church History. There is so much confusion about what the Sabbath is, and what should – or should not – be done on it.

Throughout history, most Christians have taken the Sabbath to mean ‘Sunday’, and so Sunday has traditionally been known as a ‘Day of Rest’. And we all know the debates around whether or not shops should open on a Sunday or whether people should work on a Sunday. But actually, I’m afraid that is really bad theology because Sunday is not the Sabbath: it never has been, and it is not what the early Church following Jesus believed Sabbath to be. So we need to get our heads round this idea of what the Sabbath is so that we know how to observe it properly.

Let’s think about the setting for this story again, verse 23: “One Sabbath, he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck ears of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing something like this on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?’”

Now this may not seem like too big a deal but actually, the Pharisees were making a very serious accusation here. Listen to Exodus 31:14 from the Old Testament: “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death…” So this is a serious charge – it was literally a matter of life and death for the disciples. If Jesus was not going to obey Sabbath rules, under the law he deserved to die. It appeared that Jesus was desecrating Jewish Law by behaving as he did.

So how does Jesus respond to this charge? Well, to be honest, in a completely bizarre way! The response he gives is both historically inaccurate and has nothing to do with the Sabbath!

Jesus draws on the story of David and his men, recorded in 1 Samuel 21. And before we look at the story itself, there’s two things to note here. Firstly, the story of what happened with David is not recorded as having happened on the Sabbath, so it doesn’t really illuminate this Jesus story from the perspective of Jesus wanting to teach anything about the nature of the Sabbath. Secondly, Jesus gets his history wrong here: in verse 26, he says that Abiathar was High Priest, but he wasn’t: it was Ahimelech. Anyway, that’s by the by…

In the story, David is fleeing from Saul and he arrives at the city and comes to Ahimelech and asks him for bread for his men to eat. But Ahimelech only has consecrated bread for the worship and, according to Leviticus 24:9, only priests can eat that. Nevertheless, Ahimelech sees David and the men are in real need so he gives them the bread to eat anyway. As a result Ahimelech and his family are all killed by Saul but Abiathar escaped and joined up with David later on.

It is a strange response from Jesus because he refuses to be drawn into a debate about the Sabbath as such but uses it as an opportunity, yet again, to critique the institutionalised form of faith that the Pharisees represented. It seems to me that Jesus is giving an example of the fact that there are times and occasions when even the High Priest himself would step outside of the tradition in order to show compassion and meet the real needs of others. And if the High Priest was happy to do that, then it is clear that law and tradition are there as a framework for faith but should never become our Masters.

Tradition is useful if it informs us how to meet the needs of others with compassion.

Tradition is useful if it helps us shape our ministry in a way that reflects God’s love.

But tradition ceases to be useful when we end up serving that tradition rather than acting out of love towards others.

Tradition ceases to be useful when we do not respond out of compassion for fear of going against what has become the pattern of ‘doing church’ over the years.

So Jesus is using this encounter as yet another opportunity to help people think through their attitude to inherited tradition. He is not saying that tradition should be overturned or abandoned but that we are not become slaves to it. Tradition is there as a guide, as a point of information, to help us make appropriate decisions in our worship of God and service of others and to keep us within the bounds of orthodoxy. But tradition is not our Master; love is our Master, and the demands of love outweigh the demands of Tradition at every turn. As Jesus says in verse 27: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”,

And then he finishes off with this slightly ambiguous comment in verse 28: “So the son of man is lord even of the Sabbath”. There are two completely different ways of interpreting this comment and I think either one of them is quite OK, For some people, the son of man referred to here is Jesus himself; Jesus as the second person of the Trinity who has all authority as the King of kings and Lord of lords and, as such, has lordship even over the Sabbath. That is a perfectly plausible interpretation and it is certainly the one that most English versions of the Bible take because they usually use capital letters for the phrase ‘Son of Man’ to clearly make the link with Jesus.

But there is an equally plausible alternative interpretation if we don’t use capital letters for that phrase. The phrase ‘son of man’ was a common Jewish phrase to mean ‘a human being’. It was a general term that could be applied to ordinary people. So, in that sense, it may be that Jesus is saying that all of us are masters over the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being master over us. That makes perfect sense as an interpretation particularly in the light of verse 27: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”.

So Jesus is saying that the Sabbath is here to serve us. We are not here to slavishly be tied to rules and regulations about what we can and can’t do on the Sabbath.

So what is the Sabbath – and if it is not a Sunday, how does it differ from Sunday?

Well, it’s actually quite simple. The Sabbath is – and always has been Saturday - and Sunday is most properly known as The Lord’s Day. So what’s the difference?

The Sabbath was a gift from God so that people could stop, pause, and take time out, and look back to all God’s blessings upon them in the past. Remembrance is really important: if we don’t take time to look back and remember God’s hand on our lives in the past, we will find it harder to see his work in our lives in the present day. So the Sabbath is about looking back and remembering.

But Sunday has a completely different reason for existing, from a Christian perspective. Sunday is actually about us stopping, pausing and taking time out to look forward, not backwards. Sunday is the day when we look forward in time to when Christ will return and all things will come to their conclusion in the plans of God. That is why it is so important to take Holy Communion each week on a Sunday because it is the liturgical act of looking forward to the gift of salvation that is made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist – Holy Communion – is the great liturgical gift we have to anticipate the future in the light of what Jesus has achieved for us on the cross.

So, on the Sabbath we look back with remembrance. On Sunday, we look forward in anticipation. They are two different days and have two different purposes and, as Christians, we need both.

So Sabbath Rest is much more than just having a day off. It’s actually immaterial as to whether shops are open or we watch TV or not. Sabbath Rest is engaging with the act of looking back and remembering God’s activity in our lives, and giving thanks for that.

So, of course, Sabbath is not something that happens just once a week on a Saturday. We should be taking Sabbath Moments every single day of our lives: times when we just stop for a few minutes and focus on God and remember his grace towards us. How our lives would improve, how our stress levels would reduce, how our relationships would be enhanced, how our perspective would become clearer, if only we took more Sabbath Moments throughout each day.

So in this passage, Jesus reminds us that Sabbath is important: but not in the way that the Pharisees thought it was.

The Sabbath is not one day a week on which we follow certain rules and regulations. The Sabbath is about an experience of God, the remembrance of God, which we should seek for on a daily basis, many times a day, as well as one full day per week. How much stronger the church would be if we had Christians who took the Sabbath seriously. How much stronger our own faith would be if we took the Sabbath seriously.

Perhaps we might all recommit ourselves to being ‘Sabbath-Christians’; looking back to remember God’s grace and activity in our lives and then, in the light of our Sabbath-remembrances

commit ourselves afresh daily to worship him for his goodness and serve him in the world.

Every day, every moment of every day, can be a Sabbath – if you choose for it so to be.

And the more we choose to Sabbath with God, the more we will know of him in our lives.