

Trinity 1 Sermon

Mark 2:23-3:6

- We've had Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity and now we have a long season of ordinary time ahead!
- Slowly working through Mark's Gospel (read it!) apart from a brief sojourn in John 6 in August.
- We join Mark at the end of Chapter 2 and already conflict around Jesus is building.
- Context here is Jesus being asked to teach his disciples about fasting.
 - He then explains that new wine goes in new wineskins for good practical reasons.
 - Often assumed that the "new wineskins" Jesus refers to are new structures of thought for the teaching of Jesus' new wine to go into.
 - But Jesus is probably referring to new people to receive the new wine of his teaching. New people not entirely bound to the old ways of thinking.
- Into this context we find Jesus walking along on the Sabbath with his friends. They pluck some grain (which, according to Deut 23, you're allowed to do as long as you don't use a scythe to get the grain).

- So, we have two potential infractions of Sabbath law
 - Out walking (a Sabbath Day's journey is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile)
 - Plucking grain, which counts as work.
- Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees, who are clearly watching him closely by now.
 - Jesus doesn't deny the Sabbath-breaking
 - He invites them to look at a different perspective
 - Look! David and his companions ate the bread reserved for the priests!
 - His observation invites the question: Is precision in observing the Sabbath key, or is it intention?
- The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath. It is a gift of God to promote wholeness and refreshment (for everyone, even the slaves – cf the OT reading!)
- But Jesus also goes a step further.
 - His reference to David perhaps invites a comparison. David got away with what he did because he was King! What does this suggest about Jesus if he draws a link between them?
 - He then goes on to call himself "Lord of the Sabbath". Who established the Sabbath? God himself on the 7th day of creation.
- As so often happens in Mark, the deeper question is about who Jesus is. Will you recognise who is really standing before you eating this grain?

- Then Jesus enters the Synagogue. (Could be the same day, could be Mark's editing).
- We're told straight away that there's a man with a withered hand. Can't help but wonder whether he's planted there deliberately...
 - Jesus has already driven out an unclean spirit in the Synagogue on the Sabbath in Ch 1 (one of the first public acts of ministry!) and it didn't seem too controversial.
 - But now people are watching...
- Jesus is no fool. He knows what's happening.
 - So he calls the man forward and asks a question
 - This time he changes the angle a bit.
 - Question is not "is it right to work on the Sabbath" but "it is right to do good on the Sabbath"?
 - They remain silent.
- Then Mark gives an insight into Jesus' inner life.
 - He is angry. He is grieved at hardness of heart.
 - In Jewish thinking the heart is the seat of wisdom, not emotion.
 - Jesus is not grieved at their lack of compassion for the man with the withered hand. (Could have come back and healed him tomorrow).
 - He is grieved at their lack of perception about who he is and what he offers.

- And Jesus performs about the most low-key healing in the Gospels: “Stretch out your hand”.
 - The man participates, stretches and is restored
- The use of the word “restored” is an interesting one.
 - It indicates the putting right of what had been wrong. Returning things to the intended way.
 - This is a microcosm of Jesus’ whole ministry.
 - Jesus comes to restore humanity to our lost closeness with God and each other.
- And how do the authorities respond?
 - The Pharisees and the Herodians conspire together to destroy Jesus.
 - This is as unlikely as the Republicans and Democrats coming together against a common threat.
 - Pharisees sought to restore the purity of Israel through strict observance of the law.
 - The Herodians thought that the best way to secure Israel was to work well with the Romans
 - The irony is laid bare in that back in Chapter 2 the Pharisees had condemned Jesus for going to Matthew’s house to eat with tax collectors and sinners.
 - Now they conspire with the party of tax collectors to destroy Jesus.
- So this isn’t really about Sabbath (although I think that we could do with learning some of the lessons of observing times of rest).

- This is about Mark wanting us to understand who Jesus really is. It's his constant focus from Ch 1:1.
- Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath
 - Greater than David
 - Greater than Moses, who gave the Sabbath law
- Jesus is the lens through which we make sense of the Old Testament.
- Jesus is the one who brings restoration
 - We will ultimately see this on the cross and at the empty tomb.
- **How do you respond?**
 - With hardness of heart and refusal to accept Jesus for who he is?
 - Or with love and gratitude, aware of the implications for who you are and how you live?
- Let us pray...