

In the first chapter of Mark Jesus proclaims that “the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news”. In the second chapter the Pharisees and teachers of the law are grumbling about Jesus. “Who is he? Why does he talk like this? Look his disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath”. By the third chapter they are beginning to plot to have Jesus killed.

It's interesting that the healing of the man with the withered or shrivelled hand(depending on which version) was not the only miraculous healing that took place on the Sabbath. (In fact Terry tells me there are 7 gospel accounts of Jesus healing on the Sabbath). Jesus, whilst a practicing Jew, clearly felt very strongly about how far the Pharisees had taken their rule keeping.

Yes keeping the Sabbath is the 4th commandment. (When the Wednesday Just 10 group get to it I'm sure they will find what J John has to say very interesting). The Pharisees, had set themselves up as self appointed guardians of public morality. They had expanded the law to 1521 rules for how to live a holy life. A great many of these rules pertained to keeping the sabbath.

The rules for keeping sabbath became a weapon used by the Pharisees to control people and maintain their power. But this wasn't Jesus' way. He always followed the greater law of love. Jesus confronted the Pharisees because he was so deeply distressed that they had lost sight of God's love, mercy and compassion for people.

It feels such a shame that for many Sundays are now a normal working day. Im thinking of shops and the leisure industry, not clergy they just love spending Sundays with us! A day of sabbath each week is a gift from God to enable us to rest and be restored, or as one writer says to be re-storied.(Sabbath doesn't have to be taken on Sunday). A day when we don't have to perform in any way. God himself rested from His work of creation on the 7th day.

Does sabbath have a special meaning for you? I was thinking back to my childhood. Every Sunday, my Grandmother came for lunch. Come rain or shine my mother always prepared a roast. The World at One was playing on the radio in the background. Roast lamb, onion sauce, Yorkshire puddings, roast potatoes, vegetables, gravy. A lot of hard work! It was usually tinned raspberries and cream for dessert to which my Grandmother would always say “Raspberries are so refreshing”, my sister and I trying not to giggle! The lengthy washing up, no dishwashers in the 1960's! If Gran didn't want to doze or read the paper, it was suggested we told her about our week at school. Then my mother would disappear upstairs for quite a long time. Where's Mummy we would say! Oh gone to wash her face, we were told. I later realised she needed to escape for a rest!

My mother didn't enjoy those Sundays. Regular routines, while often a good thing, can become negative. I think my mother felt enslaved by them.

There is a link between Jesus healing the man with the withered hand on the sabbath and another miraculous event, mentioned in our Deuteronomy reading. The Exodus, when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God wants us to be free. Is keeping a sabbath, important to enable us to maintain our freedom?

Also in Deuteronomy we read that it is the power of God's mighty hand and outstretched arm that released the people from slavery. In our gospel reading Jesus asks the man to "Stretch out his hand". The God of power giving the healing mirrors the same gesture as the man receiving the healing.

Physical gestures have significance. God's outstretched arm as a sign of impartation. A spiritual grace being transferred from one to another. The priestly blessing, the arm stretched out in the sacraments. The Bishop's hand reached out in ordination, and confirmation.

Also in prayer, what a lovely occasion it was when recently we prayed for Fleur and Richard on the occasion of their 50th Wedding anniversary, standing around them stretching out a hand towards them.

Watching the Chosen you can't help but notice how friendly Jesus is, he embraces people, even disheveled, smelly lepers. Perhaps you noticed the man in the film clip is reticent as Jesus approaches him and touches him. Stretching out a hand to touch links to the ancient sacrament of the laying on of hands demonstrating spiritual impartation down the centuries from Jesus, the apostles, to Bishops, priests all the way down to us today. Isn't that awesome!

Another thing I have come to realise is that repeating patterns in scripture are never just a coincidence. Frequently, as here, we can see a pattern in the OT being mirrored in the Gospels. As Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever it makes sense to look out for these same patterns to be present in life today. The context may be very different but Jesus desire to love and heal us will always be the same.

What are you praying for right now? If Jesus was here bodily and you could feel his touch what would you ask him for? Are there patterns in your life that you feel enslaved by? Do you seek greater freedom? Would you like God to stretch out his hand towards you, to heal, as you reach out your hand towards God to receive.

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