

Jesus the Law-breaker: Lord of the Sabbath

(Mark 2: 13-28)

Jesus Calls Levi

13 Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

The Question about Fasting

18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' ¹⁹Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

21 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

Pronouncement about the Sabbath

23 One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' ²⁵And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' ²⁷Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Having challenged the control of the purity system (declaring someone clean) and debt system (forgiveness) by the priests and scribes, Jesus moves on to three encounters with the Pharisees related to food (very appropriate for the week in which *World Food Day: Zero Hunger* fell).

Meals matter!

Meals were sacred affairs in Jesus' world. They mattered first because they were about eating – the place where the “daily bread” necessary for surviving the next 24 hours was to be found and consumed. For the poorest, this survival meal was by no means guaranteed, so that finding daily bread for one's self and family was the first order of business for any day. It requires a huge act of imagination to think ourselves into that sort of place for those of us whose primary problems with food revolve around obesity.

They were also deeply symbolic. Just as the Communion table is a picture of the drama of Good Friday, the ancient family meal table was a picture of how the world was ordered. Imagine Da Vinci's “Last Supper”. Who sat where mattered enormously: the host would sit in the centre of the table. On his right and left would be the most honoured guests. On either side of them would be his closest friends, or the people to whom he owed some sort of debt (financial or social). People were arranged in descending order from the greatest to the least.

Jesus' language about the “great inversion” of the Kingdom (“the first shall be last and the last shall be first”) is borrowed from the meal table. Change the seating criteria; change who is considered suitable/allowed to be at the meal and who needs to be kept away; change the serving arrangements,

and you are doing nothing less than changing the world order!

This is why Jesus' table fellowship was a matter of such controversy and generated such outrage and fury among the Pharisees.

Keeping the Law

It isn't enough just to observe that keeping God's Law was important for religious Jews. For Jesus and his contemporaries, it was a matter of national duty and salvation!

Life under Roman occupation was a living hell. Apart from the oppression and daily abuse suffered at the hands of brutal soldiers, the Roman occupation was funded by Jewish taxes. The slightest increase in the tax burden (for a new public statue of the Emperor, for example) would tip many peasant families over the edge of sustainability. Once they'd sold their land, their only chance of survival was to sell themselves and their families into indentured slavery.

The most urgent, agonised prayer, therefore, was, "Lord God, what about the Romans? *When* will you send your Messiah?" And the answer given by the interpreters of the Law was deceptively: "When all Israel keeps God's Law!"

Jesus, the Pharisees and the Law

At the heart of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is *how* to keep God's Law faithfully. For the Pharisees, Law-keeping (holiness) is all about *separation*; for Jesus, holiness is all about *compassion* – responding to need. Look at this issue in today's confrontations:

"Those who are sick need a doctor" (v17)

Jesus is at table with Levi, one of the hated tax collectors. It's a table full

of “tax collectors and sinners”, and is being looked on with horror by “the scribes and the Pharisees”. Mark has shown us the two worlds colliding. The challenge is thrown down to Jesus: “If you are a faithful Jew, why do you habitually eat with this lot?”

Jesus’ answer exposes the gulf between the two worlds: “You see these people as a contamination threat; I see them as sick people who need a doctor. Those are the people I’ve come for!”

***“The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is present!”
(v19)***

The Pharisees can only see Jesus as a Law-breaker. They cannot recognise God’s answer to their prayers for the messiah. By contrast, the victims of their religious system – the poor, the hungry and the religious outcasts – see clearly that Jesus is God’s response to their needs. The two worlds that collide here are the world of people who have to be hungry, and those well-fed people who have the luxury of choosing to go hungry in order to sensitise themselves to God. This isn’t a time for hungry people to have a religious fast (and get hungrier still!); it is a time to feast. Jesus is Good News – and that’s something to get very excited about.

“What did David do when he and his soldiers were hungry and needed food?” (v25)

Jesus and his disciples are making their way through a cornfield *on the Sabbath*. They are cutting a trail and stripping the broken down corn stalks for food.

When Jesus is challenged about Sabbath-breaking, he gives the example of David eating the Showbread on a military campaign. Mark wants to stress that Jesus, too, is waging a campaign of liberation. But the most important point Jesus wants to make is about *God’s response to hunger*: it

takes precedence over any religious rules.

“The Sabbath was made for humankind; not the other way round?”

(v27)

God’s Law was given as a blessing, not a burden. And it is always a blessing “to the least first”. That is Jesus’ conviction. Sabbath rest is a gift for people who have otherwise to work every waking hour in order to put food on the family table. Fasting is fine for people who are too well fed to be open to need; for hungry people, God is the one to whom they can turn for daily bread, even when hard-hearted religious people turn their backs on them in God’s name.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 2: 13-28)

Some people have more front than Blackpool. I couldn't believe someone had the brass neck to sneak into the Conservative Party Conference and hand the Prime Minister a pretend P45 in the middle of her conference speech. Whatever your politics, you can't help but recognise it as a brazen (if law-abiding) dig at the establishment. And whether you think it's right or wrong, appropriate or disrespectful, you can't deny that it took some bottle!

Jesus demonstrated that sort of courage in continually finding opportunities to argue and embarrass the Pharisees publicly. How we react today's text will say a great deal about how we relate to authority.

We may be the sort of Christian who finds it difficult to question or be critical of civil or religious authorities. Jesus, it seems, had no such difficulties - maybe because he grew up hearing the stories of the acts of resistance instigated by the prophets. Maybe he felt able to take on the Pharisees because he remembered those other biblical heroes who dared to

think and act differently:

Shifrah and Puah: the Hebrew midwives who refused Pharaoh's order to murder Hebrew baby boys

Jeremiah: the prophet who walked about in public wearing a yoke, to embody the yoke of God that the King had shrugged off, and the yoke of Babylonian captivity that he was bringing on the people as a result

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: the three friends of Daniel who refused publicly to bow before the statue of King Nebuchadnezzar on pain of being thrown into the fiery furnace - whether or not God saved them

Of course, it may be that Shifrah and Puah were not thinking in terms of civil disobedience, and were simply looking after their own. Jeremiah may just have been engaging in street theatre, while Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego may have been simply naive about the political manoeuvrings of the court. However, like the P45 incident, it seems that Jesus may have gone out of his way to challenge and antagonise the Pharisees publicly. Maybe the disciples were simply hungry, and absentmindedly plucked the ears of corn to eat as they walked. Or maybe (as seems more likely) Jesus took them through the field knowing that the Pharisees were watching, and, on a prearranged signal, they started very obviously and publicly to disobey the Sabbath rule.

Was it a bit like Gandhi organising the march to the sea and producing salt - a clear act of civil disobedience?



How you see the incident will depend entirely on your view of how deliberately Jesus wanted to be of the Pharisee's religious authority.

Some questions:

Is the churches' involvement in food banks an act of compassion for those who are the have-nots, or an act of public criticism of the government's austerity policies?

Which of the following quotes about acting publicly do you warm to?

- . "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."
- Desmond Tutu
- !. "Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence."
- Leonardo da Vinci
- }. "Get up, stand up. Stand up for your rights. Get up, stand up. Don't give up the fight."
- Bob Marley, *Legend*
- l. "One has a moral duty to disobey unjust laws."
- Martin Luther King Jnr
- i. "It has always been the prerogative of children and half-wits to point out that the emperor has no clothes. But a half-wit remains a half-wit, and the emperor remains an emperor."
- Neil Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones*

Check out this website on the Christian criticism of civil authority:

<https://sojo.net/biography/jim-wallis>

All age worship ideas Mark 2: 13-28

Mark 2.13-17 – Call of Levi

Theme: Jesus welcomes the unexpected, the outcast

Film clip: Disney's Tangled 'I've got a dream' (35:21 – 40:45) Rapunzel is finally free of her prison home but is wary of thieves and vagabonds. Flynn her not so gallant hero takes her straight to an inn filled with the very people she is most afraid of. However she finds more in common with them than she realized... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJICrhJD4-M>

Reflections: Jesus calls Levi/Matthew then goes to his home for food and fellowship with not just the tax collector but all sorts of riff raff. Here Jesus finds a welcome and acceptance and his being there is symbolic of the acceptance and welcome that the kingdom offers to those 'sinners' who eat with him.

The grumbling religious leaders are not happy but the tragedy is that by staying on the outside they miss a golden opportunity.

I recently learned of this amazing charity that supports the homeless. Nothing unusual in that these days sadly but the Joel Community is more than a bed to sleep in and some out of date food. For one they never use out of date food – the 'great feast' hospitality and holistic community are central to the vision of this Jesus-shaped project

<http://www.joelcommunitytrust.org.uk/about-us/>

Music: Vagabonds (Stuart Townend)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_k771zhwfs

God of the Moon and Stars (Paul Field)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k41L405QXul>

Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

HYMNS

Love inspired the anger

Tune: R&S 407 (NORTH COATES)

Love inspired the anger
That cleared a temple court,
Overturned the wisdom
Which their greed had wrought.

Love inspired the anger
That set the leper free
From the legal strictures
That brought misery.

Love inspired the anger
That cursed a viper's brood:
Set on domination,
Self with God confused.

Love inspires the anger
That curses poverty,
Preaches life's enrichment,
Seeks equality.

Love inspires the anger

That still can set us free
From the world's conventions
Bringing liberty.

Andrew E Pratt (born 1948)

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6 6 6 5 Trochaic

LITURGY

Affirmation

I refuse to believe that we are unable to influence the events around us.
I refuse to believe we are bound by racism, war, and injustice.
I believe those around me are my brother and my sister.
I believe in dignity every day and that our brokenness can be healed.
I believe we can overcome oppression and violence, without resorting to it.
This means I seek to reject revenge and retaliation.
I remember, “Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can.”

~ drawn from the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. by Abigail Reichard, a student at Christian Theological Seminary. Posted on the Disciples of Christ **Council on Christian Unity** website. <http://ccu.disciples.org/>

Prayers:

Merciful God,

who is more than we can ever imagine,
give us a wider vision of the world;
give us a broader view of justice;
give us dreams of peace
that are not defined by boundaries of geography
or race or religion,
or by the limitations of worldly structures and systems.

Open our eyes and our ears
that wherever we go,
we may hear your voice calling us by name;
calling us to serve,
calling us to share,
calling us to praise,
so that we never give up on the promise of your kingdom,
where the world is transformed,
and all can enjoy life in all its fullness.
Amen.

~ posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the Christian
Aid website. <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

Another Way: A Prayer of Dedication

Teach us the courage, O God,
to turn from what seems so natural, so safe:
the way of grasping power,
and befriending the powerful,
in the hope of protection and security.

Teach us the humility, O God,
to turn from what is so enticing, so persuasive:
the way of accumulating things,
and trusting in wealth,
in the hope of comfort and life

Lead us, O God, in another way,
the way of true security, true wealth,
the way of Christ, the servant,
the way of weakness and simplicity.

Lead us, O God, in another way,
the way of caring for the neglected,
feeding the hungry,
housing the homeless,
protecting the threatened,
and challenging the powerful,
the foolish way of the Gospel,
that brings salvation to all.

Amen.

— Written by John van de Laar, and posted on his excellent website, [Sacredise.com](https://sacredise.com). Visit his site for other good lectionary-based prayers and worship resources.