

Fr. Francis Maple – Pantasaph Friary

9th SUNDAY OF YEAR C, 2021

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH

Mk. 3:20-35

What would Jesus say today to the strict modern Jews concerning their observance of the Sabbath? He would applaud the fact that they observe the Sabbath by coming together as a family to worship God. But I think He would strongly condemn the strict petty rules they observe concerning ceasing from work, for example, forbidding the use of a lift, turning on a light switch, forbidden switching on of an electric kettle etc.

The observance of the Sabbath was originally a thing of joy, but too many rabbis kept on issuing one injunction after another restricting people's freedom that eventually it became burdensome. Observance of the Sabbath is the worship of God and God never intended loving Him to be a burden. They had made the observance of the Sabbath an end in itself. Jesus summed it up so beautifully, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

What led Jesus to make this statement? It was the fact that when the disciples of Jesus passed through the grain fields on a Sabbath day, they inadvertently plucked some heads of grain. For this the Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath! Their conduct of plucking the heads of grain was interpreted as reaping, and rubbing them in their hands to reject the chaff as winnowing. Such behaviour was forbidden by their interpretation of observing the Sabbath. How ridiculous and petty can you get! Granted the Mosaic Law stated, "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest", but to class as work what the disciples were doing was going too far. The Pharisees maintained that the disciples' conduct was reprehensible and that Jesus was responsible for their misbehaviour.

Jesus answered them by referring to David and his companions that they, too, when hungry ate the show-bread from the temple which none but priests were allowed to eat. The fact that God did not condemn David for his action indicates the narrowness with which the scribes interpreted the Law concerning the Sabbath.

Today, let us try to understand the real meaning of the Sabbath. The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew 'sabbat' which means 'to cease'. Cease from what? Cease from work or to rest. One of God's commandments is "Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day." God gave Moses this commandment in imitation of His having worked for six days creating the world and on the seventh day He rested. For the Jews the Sabbath was not just a day of rest from physical labour after six days of work, it was related to the covenant God made with His people and was a day consecrated to Him in a special way. It was a reminder of God's liberation of the people of Israel from the slavery of Egypt and bringing them to the resting place, the Promised Land.

Therefore, the observance of the Sabbath was seen as fidelity to the covenant and as a means to salvation. It was a celebration of the Lordship of Yahweh over all creation. Non-observance was tantamount to apostasy.

Initially, the Sabbath was a joyful, relaxed day of rest, but in time the joy of the Sabbath disappeared and gave way to a more meticulous and restrictive observance of the Sabbath. By the time Jesus came the joyful spirit of the Sabbath was lost and people only experienced the hardship of it. It was this practice that Jesus tried to rectify.

For the Jews the Sabbath was Saturday. For Christians the Sabbath was Sunday because it was on this day that Jesus rose from the dead and completed our salvation.

One of the chief accusations the Pharisees brought against Jesus was that He disregarded the Sabbath because He did not view it as they did. Jesus laid down the important principle: the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He was stressing that the observance of the Sabbath should not be placed among the essential and inflexible laws of right or wrong. Man is made for purity, truth, justice and godliness. It is better for him to die than ignore these. These are the laws of his being. He lives a holy life in obeying them.

Rules and ceremonies are made to help man worship and love God. They are good, but they are not absolutes. Mercy, justice, truth and godliness surpass the observance of these. The larger obligations in life overrule the lesser. Ceremonial observance must give way to human need. That is why it is allowed to miss Mass on Sunday if a sick child or elderly relative needs our attention on that day.

Let us conclude by thanking God for giving us the commandment to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the Lord's Day. It is on this day that the Lord gives us the opportunity to be able to worship Him.

Lord Jesus, may we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into observing Sunday as a day of rest and giving this time to God. We expect God to give us eternity making us happy, can we not give Him one day of our week?