

Address on 12th July 2020 – Lessons from Mark's gospel, week 3

What's special about Sunday? Jesus' teaching about the sabbath – Mark3:1-6

Introduction

Have you ever seen the comedy show 'Friday Night Dinner'? It's based around a Jewish family, Mum, Dad and two grown up boys (grown up in age, though not necessarily in the way they act) who come together every Friday night for dinner. Why do they eat together every Friday night? Because this is the start of the Jewish sabbath. But surely the sabbath is on Saturday I hear you say. Yes, it is, but it starts at sundown on Friday and runs through to sundown on Saturday. This goes right back to the story of creation where in Genesis we read 'there was evening, and there was morning, the first day' and so on. As God creates each new day, evening is always mentioned first and so the sabbath begins in the evening.

The Christian sabbath

For Christians the sabbath day has been moved to Sunday because that was the day that Jesus rose again from the dead. Our special day is Sunday though it is generally accepted that what the Bible says about the sabbath we can apply to our use of Sunday. What does the Bible say?

The obvious place to start is the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5). The fourth commandment reads as follows:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Reading these words reminded me that I was in a lecture once where the speaker told us about 'sabbath elevators'. These are elevators in apartment blocks which on the sabbath automatically run up and down stopping at every floor. The idea is that you can then take the elevator without having to press any buttons or do any 'work'. Mind you, whilst some Jewish people are very strict about this kind of thing it is not true of all. Our lecturer also told us that while Orthodox Jews walk to the synagogue on the sabbath, Conservative Jews drive to the car park around the corner and then walk, and Liberal Jews simply drive to the synagogue.

Reading the fourth commandment also reminded me of the 'Keep Sunday Special' campaign of 30 years ago. Youngsters in this country have grown up with professional football being played on Sundays and shops, big and small, being open for business but it wasn't always the case. This happened only 30yrs or so ago. I can remember as a curate being in church one Sunday and persuading our congregation then and there, en masse, to write letters to our MP in support of the campaign. He saw through it of course and although the letters were posted individually, he wrote a single letter back to the vicar asking him to thank his congregation for their letters.

Many Christians campaigned hard for Sunday not to become just like any other day but in large part secularism won out. What are we to do? Do we give in? do we go with the flow and accept that the world has moved on, or do we want Sunday still to be a special day?

What does Jesus say?

At the beginning of Mark chapter 3 it is the sabbath day and Jesus has gone to the synagogue to pray. There is a man with a withered hand there and the religious leaders watch closely to see what Jesus will do. He has already performed many miracles and healed many people. What will he do for this man?

Jesus looked at the people there and he asked them 'Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' As so often when Jesus asked a question, his hearers seem to have been stunned into silence. Mark tells us that Jesus was grieved at their hardness of heart. Then he looked at the man with the withered hand and he said to him 'stretch out your hand,' and he stretched it out and it worked again.

What this passage says to me is that we mustn't get too prescriptive about how we use our Sunday, about what we do and don't do, about what we think is allowed and what isn't. That was a mistake made by the religious leaders in Jesus' day but as Jesus told them on another occasion, 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.' That doesn't mean, however, that Sunday should be treated just like any other day. If this story teaches us one thing it teaches us that Jesus went to the synagogue to pray on the sabbath. Sunday, above all days, is a day for worship.

Now let me say here that I am very aware that some people are required to work on Sundays. Our hospitals and ambulance services, our trains and motorway services, to give just a few examples, cannot simply stop on a Sunday. So, for some people, it may be that they have to choose a different day as their 'sabbath', but for those of us not working on a Sunday the Bible teaches us that we should turn our minds to God on this day and if possible meet with fellow believers for worship.

What's special about Sunday?

So to return to our question, 'What's special about Sunday?' The answer surely is that God has given us this day to 'recharge our batteries', physically and spiritually. It is a day for rest and a day for worship. For many it is a day for family and friends or for going out for the day. It is a day to be looked forward to because it is different. At least it is if we make it so. It is not meant to be the same as every other day.

I think the challenge for us is to ask ourselves, in our individual situations, how do we make Sunday special. As part of that, how do we make sure it is an opportunity to meet with God. On my Sunday list, I have these things: worship, fellowship, family and fun. What's on your list?

Intrinsically Sunday is no different to any other day, but we can make it different so let's do it and reap the benefits.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you again for this special day, a day each week when we have the chance to do something different. Help us to use it wisely for our physical and spiritual nourishment. Amen.

Anthony Smith