

Pro-Cathedral

19 January 2022

Welcome

In a time of great personal freedom, it turns out that we, as a society, are a fairly law-abiding lot. Mostly, we kept to the rule and the restrictions. In the past, this would also have been true of us a people of faith: you had to go to Mass on Sunday, you had to go to confession before hand, you had to perform your Easter duty and receive Holy Communion once a year with specified dates. And so on. There were lots of rules.

Topic

It can, therefore, be a surprise to have a Gospel story in which Jesus himself apparently breaks the Sabbath. What is going on?

Steps

In the ancient Jewish tradition and still today the Sabbath was not a man-made rule. As we remember, it was one of the Ten Commandments. It was significant part of Jewish identity that one day a week they reminded themselves they were not defined by work, they were not just slaves or oppressed. The ancient Romans thought they were just lazy – every other person worked 7 days a week and there was no weekend. To protect the Sabbath, very detailed regulations were developed and are still practiced today. In the early twentieth century, Jews around Clanbrassil St hired, non-Jews, mostly Catholics to light their fires in the winter and to turn on their ovens for cooking. It still goes on, although nowadays Jews use timers for lighting, heating and cooking. So, when Jesus broke the Sabbath, it was a bit deal. It was not only flagrant but needlessly provocative – there are six other days in the week, why not heal on one of those?

Jesus was up to two things. Firstly, he was reacting to the over legalisation of religion. There were detailed rules for everything. In yesterday's Gospel the disciples nibbled ears of corn in a field – technically, they were harvesting and even milling. We might smile, but of course we had, in our tradition, exactly the same tendency to control and attraction to detail. The rules may mostly help us but from time to time they really miss the point.

Our Gospel story is a good example. According to the book of Exodus, the Sabbath commemorates the escape from Egypt, the liberation of the people of Israel. In other words, it is a day of freedom. Hence the sharp question of Jesus: Is it *against* the law to save life, given that the Sabbath was to mark lives being saved? Jesus steps forward courageously and cuts through a lot of nonsense to get to the heart of the matter.

Conclusion

In the next couple of weeks, there will be a huge consultation of us all under the banner of the Synodal Pathways. The question before us will be: what is God asking of his church as we step into an unknown future? Once more, we will have to ask ourselves: what do we need to set aside so that we can get to the heart of the matter? Or, in other words, how can we as a church be servants of the Good News in our day and offer wider society the word of life? Nothing could be more important.