

Trinity 17, 2016

“Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”. (Ephesians 4.1-3)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It may help to go back over the details of this morning’s Gospel: it was the Sabbath Day – the day of rest. The day mentioned in the fourth of the Ten Commandments: “Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work” – not even your cattle!

The second important detail was the location. The Lord Jesus was in the house of one of the chief Pharisees – not a junior man, but one of the chief Pharisees – highly educated; an ‘expert’ in the Jewish religious Laws; an influential person in the community.

The third detail is the condition of one of the other guests: one of the men present had the dropsy. In other words, he had some swelling – some edema. It could have been in his ankles or feet; or, as one Biblical scholar says, it could have been in the man’s abdomen as a result of an infection in his liver, which, in that day, was common due to recurrent attacks of malaria.

A fourth thing to note in the Gospel is the phrase “they watched Him”. “They” – the Pharisee and his friends – watched the Lord Jesus. Maybe because they were suspicious of Him; maybe because they were jealous of His fame and power and unconventionality; but definitely because there was a ‘situation’ developing right there in that house on the Sabbath day. Remember: no work was to be done on the Sabbath. In fact, 39 prohibited activities were specifically outlined, in very detail, in the Jewish tradition. These included planting, plowing, reaping, gathering, threshing, winnowing, grinding, sifting, cooking, baking, sewing, writing, slaughtering, and building...to name a few!

Of course, the Lord Jesus knew all of these; and so did the chief Pharisee and the others around the table, including, no doubt, the man with the dropsy. So, Jesus cut straight to the chase and asked the question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath Day?” It was NOT okay to sort grain for the purposes of cleaning or purifying it; and it was NOT okay to cook a meal – how about performing a miracle? No answer – the Gospel says, “They held their peace”. Jesus then “took the man with the swollen abdomen, and (we presume) laid His hands upon Him, and healed Him, and let him go”.

Then, the LORD responded to the silence of the Pharisee: “Which of you,” He asked “shall have a donkey or an ox, fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day?” Again, silence – “they could not answer Him”. They were afraid to say the wrong thing. Their minds and hearts were so completely paralysed by the letter of the Law that they were missing the spirit of it, which is/was to honour Almighty God in love and obedience.

The LORD’s question about the ox in the ditch was real for those men that day. For us, it could be car-related: if your vehicle suddenly died while driving on Mountain Road, on the Sabbath, would you leave it there; or would you call a tow truck? And yet, the actual situation in this morning’s Gospel was NOT about a vehicle or an ox – it was about showing Mercy to a real, live human being! As one preacher said, “The Jew would have no ‘right’ to get the ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath day. He plainly violated the law. Mercy and compassion pardoned the violation because of the circumstance.”

After healing the man with the dropsy (aka ‘the ox in the ditch’), Jesus told a parable. It was direct and meant to underline our need for humility, which is a foundation stone of Charity. He said, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”. In other words, ‘If you think you are better than others, you will soon be disappointed. It’s better to be promoted! So, lower yourself so that you will have room to be lifted up.’”

That’s where this morning’s Epistle comes in: St. Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, “walk worthy of the vocation to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love,

endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The thing is, if we think we are perfect; if we think we are better than others; if I am impatient and unwilling to listen and to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes; if I am not willing to remember that the LORD stretched out His arms and was nailed to the Cross, and bled and died there for me, I will not be able to see the needs of others; and, consequently, according to the Epistle, I will be an impediment to the unity the Lord desires for His Church.

This does NOT mean that I should simply ‘go with the flow’ and accept whatever the culture is doing. It does NOT mean that I should let go of or ignore or change the Truth of God’s Word. It does mean that I am called – we are called, as members of Christ – to be merciful. And, it means that I better be prepared to answer for my lack of mercy on Judgement Day.

May the LORD give us eyes to see the ox in the ditch this week – that person with the swelling. May He help us to remember that we, ourselves, were once that person – and continue to be that person. And may He give me patience and grace to genuinely lower myself – as Christ lowered Himself for me – and respond with God’s Truth and Grace, and the Hope of our Risen Saviour.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...