

When people are looking for help, and difficult decisions need to be made, do we sometimes hide behind “red tape” and regulations?

In our Gospel reading today we hear of Jesus’ breach with convention when he violated the Sabbath by healing a man’s withered hand in the synagogue. Why Jesus was in this particular synagogue, on this particular day we are not told. Was it to preach, or to heal, or was he simply attending for worship? Whatever his reason, he does find himself in a dilemma when he sees a man with a withered hand and he knows he has to do something about it, but the religious establishment of the day did not allow healing on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees, who were rigid and unbending in their understanding of the Sabbath, were also present that day, and they watched Jesus intently to see what he would do. Jewish laws forbade work of any kind. They believed that minimal medical attention only could be given on the Sabbath if a life was in danger. Bandaging a wound was acceptable, but the application of ointment was considered to be work, and was forbidden. In short, you could only keep a problem from getting worse. You could not make it better, as that would be work.

This rigidity also extended beyond the medical sphere. Meals could not be prepared on the Sabbath, neither could a scribe hold a pen, nor seamstresses a needle. Even in war soldiers would face slaughter rather than break the Sabbath rules by fighting to defend themselves. The orthodox Jewish perspective was completely harsh and inflexible.

Jesus knew that. This man’s life was not in danger. Physically he would be no worse off if healing could be deferred until tomorrow, but for Jesus this was a test case and he chose to meet the challenge in a very public place where no-one could fail to see it.

Jesus asked the experts in the law – “*Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?*” This put the Pharisees in a quandary. Surely it was a better thing to be thinking about helping a man than it was to be thinking about killing a man. No wonder they had no answer for him. The Pharisees were clear about their place in the world, and God’s plan for it, but the words and actions of Jesus upset their propriety.

Then Jesus with a word healed the man, and the Pharisees left the synagogue to hatch a plot with the Herodians (*who were attendants in the court of King Herod, and who were in regular contact with the Romans*) how to kill him.

To the Pharisees religion was a ritual. It meant obeying certain rules and regulations. Jesus broke these regulations, so they were genuinely convinced that he was a bad man. For them religion consisted in going to the synagogue, reading the Scriptures and ritual cleansing – but never having sympathy or putting themselves out to do anything for others who were in need. This controversy over a man with a withered hand seals Jesus’ fate. For the Pharisees the rule of the Sabbath took precedence over the infirmity of another. But for Jesus religion meant doing good, restoring life.

For Jesus, religion was about service. It was about love of God, and love of humankind.

Today, COVID 19 has impacted religion in various ways, including the cancellation of worship services in many of our churches. Sunday Schools have been closed – and pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals have been cancelled. But despite places of worship having suspended services, religious activities have been quickly and efficiently transferred to a virtual environment, enabling churches to overcome the disturbance caused by the virus.

Churches and Cathedral buildings currently closed to worship are offering venues for COVID testing and vaccination facilities to the public.

At a time of need our churches are dispensing with much red tape and regulations, in order to come alongside people in their need, in a testimony of grace, and love, and mercy, demonstrating how God expects us to love each other, in the same way that Christ loves us.

Keep well. God Bless

June