

THE EMMAUS SERIES

9th Sunday Year B

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

2 Corinthians 4:6-11

Mark 2:23 – 3:5

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath

The gospel passages we hear each Sunday should nourish our Christian life. The dramatic confrontations between Jesus and his opponents we hear so often have a lesson for all of us. Laws and regulations have a place in every healthy community. However, legalism – an emphasis upon the letter of the law that has lost sight of the purpose of the law – has often become an oppressive and discouraging burden.

Coming to call God's People to fulfil their great destiny as 'a light to the nations' by living according to the ways of God, Jesus found a nation whose leaders were lost in a legalism that made it difficult for the ordinary people to know the blessings God had given to them. That is why Jesus was so forthright in his dealing with these influential groups, often referred to as 'the scribes and Pharisees'.

As on other occasions, today's two confrontations concern Sabbath observances. Israel's Sabbath observance was an admirable, wholesome tradition, giving practical expression to the heart of their common faith – taking, each week, a common day of rest on which they remembered with gratitude that God freed them from slavery and made them a free people, dear to God. Interpreters of the Law, however, had made this blessing into a burden, calling for a demanding sabbath regime that itemised thirty nine activities which were forbidden. Rabbinical authorities were not in agreement in these matters, but the fact that people in the synagogue were ready to find fault with Jesus for healing on the sabbath shows the extent of the problem.

The reaction of Jesus has lessons for all of us. He criticised his opponents by showing the inconsistency of their position, asking those who saw themselves as the defenders of Israel's faith, 'Have you read what the scriptures have to tell?' and quoting the example of the scriptures against them. Those given to legalism usually speak out of ignorance and insensitivity concerning the issues involved. But the main argument Jesus used was an appeal to common sense: 'Can any sane person believe that it is against the law of God to heal on the Sabbath? Do you really think that ritual customs are more important than coming to the help of those in need?' No wonder those listening were encouraged to hear what he had to say.

Ritual regulations and customs can tend to make people blind to more important things. We are reminded that all our practices as committed Catholics, especially our Sunday worship, should lead us to grow in our generous concern for those around us.

John Thornhill sm