

Pentecost 2B, June 3rd, 2018

Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, 2 Cor 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-36

The Memory of Freedom: People Matter more than Systems.

Introduction

Christian conversion is an oft misunderstood thing; equally for those inside the church as for those outside. For many who claim Christian identity, conversion is correctly construed as a *turning toward Jesus, a following of Jesus*. But, what that following Jesus actually means is a vague, nebulous thing. Beyond becoming a loving person in individual relationships, it all becomes a fog. This is never more-so than when Christians offer their views about society and the world, when they offer their opinions about moral and ethical questions. More often than not, they are many and varied, often at odds with each other.

Today's readings give us a strong clue as to the method Jesus uses in his thinking about society and the world. *The way* we think about things fundamentally shapes, even determines, our conclusions. If our method of thinking is a problem, then our conclusions will be also. What I want to do this morning is, first to look at how Jesus thinks about society and the world, and then second, how he applies it. Then I will draw a brief conclusion

The Readings

In our story today, we find Jesus' in conflict with a particular group of religious leaders: the pharisees. It involves two accounts which point to the same conclusion. The first, concerns Jesus and his disciples consuming the heads of wheat in the fields on the sabbath, on the religious day of observance: presumably because they were hungry. He is challenged on the basis that he is violating the rules, the law; for to eat constituted an act of work: something forbidden on the "day of rest". The next story in this reading, concerns the healing of a man with a withered hand. Again, Jesus is challenged on the basis that such an effort constitutes work on the day of rest.

Now, Jesus' responses to the two challenges are different, but also similar. His second response is very specific: *"Is it lawful on the Sabbaths to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to destroy it?"* Apparently, Jesus understands that life takes priority over rules. But let's now turn to his first response: it is broader, explained in terms of a principle: In response to the criticism made of him because he and his disciples picked heads of wheat, he pushes back with the words, *"The Sabbath came into being for the human and not the human for the Sabbath – or as the modern phraseology puts it, "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath"*. How can we sum this up clearly? Perhaps this way: *"People matter! Systems are there to serve people, not people systems."*

Let us now go back to the Hebrew reading, the reading from Deuteronomy! On a first take, we see that the narrative is all about rest. Now, there is a better-known account in the Hebrew Bible about rest on the Sabbath – from Exodus (20:8-11) – but it is quite different to our reading today. In the Exodus version, the reason given for resting on the Sabbath, is because God apparently rested on the seventh day or Sabbath, having taken six days to make creation. In Deuteronomy however, the reason for rest is very different: to rest on the Sabbath is a way to recall, to remember, the Hebrew people's liberation from slavery. The Sabbath then is a remembering, a *making present* of God's gift of freedom. And so, we have

the words, *“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that I, the LORD your God, rescued you by my great power and strength. That is why I command you to observe the Sabbath”*.

So, what can we make of all this? In a sense, it is about Jesus, trying to inject the eternal into the temporal, the kingdom of God into the ordinary. It is about, correcting social structures, with the aim of making right what has gone wrong, of bringing justice where injustice dominates. The critical insight of Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath, is a window for Christians as we cast our own gaze over the world in which we live. Not just religious, but also, economic, political and cultural structures: all are to be evaluated, to be judged, according to the degree to which they serve human beings.

People matter. Systems are there to serve people, not people, systems.