

This is the day.

When I worked at MLA we had an awful of rules and procedures. As well as standards and guidelines. And work instructions. And models and templates. And reports and deadlines.

All of those things – those rules – were in place for a reason. And they'd been developed in consultation. and following best practice and so on.

But over time, those rules had been developed. It seemed every procedure had alternatives and options, every standard had exceptions, additional templates were developed for different cases. It was complex, and it became more and more complex over time.

It was tricky for new employees to navigate. Some of the rules were more strictly followed than others. While those charged with making sure the systems were followed were generally helpful – sometimes, understandably, they became frustrated. And sometimes, they may have even delighted in catching people out.

I think that's generally the way with human systems.

I went to our Presbytery meeting this week, and there was significant discussion around how to assess the vitality of a congregation across the areas of membership, witness, ministry, governance and finance. In particular, there was a lot of concern about the increasing burden of governance requirements on congregations.

I suspect the end result will be a vitality return that has to be completed and submitted by every congregation by a certain date each year. It will likely be a good thing, but it will be something extra to do. It will be yet another burden – though hopefully not too onerous a burden, but a burden nonetheless.

That's the way with human systems. So, as we look to Jewish law and the people who followed it, we shouldn't ridicule it or them. By Jesus time, the Jewish people had been following the law for centuries on centuries. The rules had been considered and explored and clarified time and time again. There were clear rabbinical teachings about all the details – what was work and what was not work and so on– and all those teachings had been carefully considered by people who were faithful to God.

The Sabbath requirements were clear: From sunset Friday to Sunset Saturday, God's people were to rest.

Simple, right? Go back to the Ten Commandments:

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. (Exodus 20:8-10).

Do no work on the Sabbath. From Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, Jewish people rested. Any meals were prepared before Sabbath began. The people attended Synagogue together. They relaxed in their homes.

Simple: Do no work. Ah.... But what is work?

By Jesus time it was complex. And in modern times it's more complex again. Look around St Ives on a Saturday morning and you'll see that complexity in action as you see Jewish people making their way to Synagogue. Driving a car is work, so they need to walk. I understand pushing a pram is work, but carrying a child is not. It seems strange to us, but it has all been carefully considered and decided over thousands of years.

In our reading from Luke's gospel today, we encounter this strict interpretation of work – and we see Jesus offending the Synagogue leader by healing woman who had been crippled eighteen years on the Sabbath.

The leader was offended because Jesus had violated the traditional interpretation of the Sabbath, because, in that interpretation, healing counted as working. Now, Jesus' healing of the woman was miraculous, just done by putting his hands on her – not healing in the traditional sense – which would have been medicines and poultices and so on. But it was still healing, and it was done in public, in the Synagogue, and as a result the leader of the place was indignant.

Luke tells us about the woman – [she] had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. (13:11).

I understand that the original Greek of the gospel literally translates as saying she was "having a spirit of weakness." The cause of the woman's problem beyond Luke's understanding of the natural world. But Luke, who was a physician, knew her ailment was not God's intention. Sickness is not of God – it was not part of God's good creation, and sickness entered the world as a result of our (the world's) broken relationship with God. Ultimately, of course, as John tells us in the book of Revelation, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain".

In this act of healing, Jesus is foreshadowing exactly that. The writer Tom Wright, observed that "We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order". Jesus was restoring this woman to how she should have been. How God intended her to be. She straightened up. And she praised God.

She didn't ask for healing. But Jesus saw her condition, and her suffering. Jesus saw her need for healing. And so, with great compassion he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her and immediately she straightened up.

Imagine that. As we read the scriptures, we find many stories of miraculous healings. Lame man walks. Blind man sees. Haemorrhagic woman is cured. Leper is cleansed. We get a bit used to the stories. Yes, Jesus did these miracles... let's get on to his death and resurrection!

But this woman had been bent over for eighteen years. Imagine if you'd bent over in 2004, five or six prime ministers ago, when George W Bush was US president, when Steve Irwin was holding baby Bob in one hand and feeding a crocodile with the other, and then you

hadn't been able to straighten until today. How would life over those 18 years have been for you?

The healing would have been beyond all possible expectations for this woman, and all those around her. The woman's life was changed forever by Jesus' touch. She rightly praised God in celebration, and I'm sure those who knew her celebrated too.

But at least one person didn't celebrate.

The Synagogue leader didn't care – it seems – about the marvellous outcome for the woman, but he held that Jesus had done the wrong thing. It didn't matter to him that the woman was healed, but what matter was that what Jesus had done violated the rules.

Now this might surprise you, but sometimes, in churches people say or do the wrong thing. And we have guidelines and rules and procedures to deal with that. And generally, the appropriate response is not to admonish people in public. It's not generally appropriate to correct a preacher during a sermon. And it's not appropriate to publicly shame people.

But the synagogue leader didn't take his concern quietly to Jesus, he took his complaint to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

There was a miraculous healing in front of him. Eighteen years of suffering of someone he presumably knew, lifted. But it was done on the wrong day.

He was an eyewitness to a miracle, but he wasn't moved by it.

From how Jesus responds to the man's indignation, it seems the leader was not alone in his opinion, because in verse 15 we read that the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?"

It is not just "you hypocrite" it is "you hypocrites", and "Doesn't each of you...", and later on in the reading Luke refers to "his opponents". So I think the Synagogue leader was not alone in worrying about Jesus' timing.

The definition of 'work' had been debated and refined by the rabbis over the years. The system had become a complex array of rules and exceptions, and provision had been made to ensure emergencies could be coped with, and people in particular need (the sick, the elderly and the young) could be cared for and livestock could be fed and watered. But they hadn't provided an exception for the healing of long term ailment.

If they had had considered it, they may well have said, "Just wait until tomorrow...it's been eighteen years, what difference is another day going to make?" I'm sure the synagogue leader would have thought waiting another day would be the appropriate response.

Perhaps the Synagogue leader's reaction was not simply because a rule had been broken, but maybe he was afraid for his position in the community, too. He was the spiritual leader of his community, and here was Jesus, a respected teacher certainly, but an outsider to the community, coming in and doing what the Synagogue leader couldn't do.

It's easy to rely on rules. Stick by the rules, and you'll be right. If someone else breaks a rule, well, let's make sure they're held to account. So, I think the leader may have been trying to salvage his own credibility in challenging Jesus.

But Jesus, whatever the leader's motives, reveals the man's failings: "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?" You accept that people can look after their animals on the sabbath, but you would deny help to a person?

In verse 16 Jesus asks, "Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

Shouldn't she be set free? The Sabbath Day is God's day, so isn't it appropriate that that is the day that she be released from her suffering? Satan has kept her bound for eighteen years... don't let Satan have her for a single day more. This is the day.

Our reading from Isaiah 58 (13-14a) tells us more about the Sabbath and how it should work:

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the Lord's holy day honourable,
and if you honour it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the Lord."

It tells us that the Sabbath is not about the bureaucratic following of rules: instead it's about honouring it as holy, about delighting in it, and about not trivialising it or treating it carelessly.

In the second chapter of Mark's gospel, makes a similar point (Mark 2:23-24,27)

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ... ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, however we might express it, is there for our benefit. The Sabbath is there to ensure we have time to connect with God. The Sabbath is there for our rest.

And that's what's reflected in Jesus words to the hypocrites.

Luke tells us "When [Jesus] said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing."

Jesus opponents were humiliated. Whatever their motives may have been, their argument was in tatters. They had argued against what Jesus had done, but it turned out they had no argument against what Jesus had said. Of course, they may have been less humiliated if they

had taken their concerns quietly to Jesus... but their public stance led to their public humiliation.

When we read that the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing, I think they were clearly very happy about the miraculous healing, but I can't help but think that they were probably pretty happy about Jesus putting the Synagogue leader and his supporters in their place too.

The people were delighted. As well as freeing this woman from the burden of her condition, he'd freed the people from the bureaucratic burden that the Sabbath had become. Jesus said *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matt 11:28-30).

God wants to ease our burdens, whatever they may be. Jesus says come to me and I will give you rest – not a bureaucratic twenty-four-hour period once a week which is an effort to prepare for, and requires careful monitoring to make sure we don't accidentally do some sort of "work". But true rest. Rest for our souls.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians that the legalistic requirements of the law are met by Jesus when he says God has forgiven us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands; this God set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

We shouldn't get tied up in rules and regulations that don't help us. God's commands to us are for our own good, and John tells "this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3)

We make them burdensome. We don't even need to try. But when we test limits, when we add clarifications and exceptions of our own making, and particularly when we try to apply those commands to others, as the rabbis had done back in Jesus' time they become burdensome. To us and to others. And they can even become a barrier to the sharing of God's kingdom.

The Sabbath is made for us. God made the Sabbath for us.

How ever we honour it, the Sabbath is God's day.

This is the day.

Amen.