

Sermon Given by

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Mark 3:1-6 - "If looks could kill"

A few years back a Christian book appeared with a very striking title: 'Your God is too small'. I confess I haven't read the book; but I do think it is an excellent title. And it can be applied very specifically to the person of Jesus.

The popular version of Jesus Christ that exists today in many people's minds is far too small to make any sense of the actual evidence we have of who he is and what he is like. The New Testament shouts back at us: 'Your Jesus is too nice, too ordinary, too small.'

The chilling end to our passage today in Mark 3:6 is a case in point. ***Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*** Most twenty-first century versions of Jesus are so inoffensive and bland that there is zero likelihood that they would drive anyone to murder.

That reaction only makes sense if the Jesus of history was very different from the popular version of him which many people have today: the great moral teacher, whose ethic can be summed up with what is rapidly becoming the best known verse in the Bible: ***'Judge not, lest ye be judged.'***

Have you ever pondered why that verse is now better known, arguably than John 3:16? It's because we are re-designing Jesus as a pale reflection of ourselves and tolerance is supposed to be the great virtue today. So of course we like that aspect of Jesus' teaching: ***'judge not, lest ye be judged.'*** And we forget many other things which he said which are less to our taste. Well, our Jesus is much too small...

What provoked his enemies to want to kill him here was the enormity of his claims. We began to see that last week. In Chapter 2:28 He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath.

He began by saying: 'let me remind you of whole point of Sabbath: the Sabbath made for man, not man for Sabbath'. He's really raising the question which came first? Man or the Sabbath? They would all know the answer: Day 6 God works: and he makes man; Day 7 God rests: The Sabbath.

OK then, QED: The Sabbath must be made for man, not other way round. It wasn't as if God set up a Sabbath Law and then said to himself, 'Right I've got this law: I know, I'll make man and he'll jolly well keep it'. He made **man** first... and **then** Sabbath Rest was a **gift** to man. That's still the case today; a weekly day off is God's purpose-built gift for humanity for our good.

Up to that point, perhaps heads are nodding – they might not like what he's saying, but they can't argue with the logic. But what Jesus says next is electric. 'So if the Sabbath was made for Adam, the prototype Man, then surely it belongs to the Son of Man... Man Mark 2 . The Perfect Man, Man as he was meant to be'. That's what Jesus claims for himself in verse 28: ***The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath***

It is a breathtaking claim and it leaves Jesus' opponents spitting blood... But it is typical of Jesus and the way he takes what they value most of all and claims it for himself.

Do they value their Old Testament **Heroes**? 'Well' says Jesus: 'I'm greater than David and I'm greater than Solomon'. Are they keen on **temple**? 'Well', says Jesus: 'I'm greater than the temple...'

Do they set great store on **Sabbath**? 'Well', says Jesus 'I'm the Son of Man, I'm Man as he was meant to be: therefore I'm Lord of the Sabbath - it's mine'.

'Don't quote the **laws** at me', he says, 'as if I don't know them: I invented the Sabbath: it's mine for me to do as I chose with it: I'm the Lord: I'll tell you how to obey it'.

That's what he does on another Saturday in Chapter 3... Let me read a bit out - it's pure theatre... 1-3: ***¹Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. ²Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."***

Clearly Jesus is no wimp: He is up for it: and he wants everyone to know he is and everyone present to see this confrontation: 'Get up into the middle', he says. It has the spin-off that the miracle which happened was publicly witnessed by a full synagogue; but it's more than that: it is a pointer to the courage of Jesus.

He doesn't see his enemies eyeing him suspiciously and think to himself – 'well there is no real need to do this today – it isn't a life-threatening condition – it can wait – so why antagonise the Pharisees?'

He could have slipped the man a business card and quietly asked him to phone up for an appointment the next day. That would be the path of British non-confrontation.

But that Jesus is far too small. He stands the man up in front of everyone. And then he takes the experts on: Verse 4: ***⁴Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"***

That is brilliant... 'What does God's Law tell me?' he asks. 'What should I do in the face of this need on Sabbath? Should I do good and heal this man? Or does God's law tell me that knowing I can help him I should deliberately choose not to?'

His hearers knew very well that that was evil: always in the Bible there is a vanishingly thin line between choosing not to do good and doing evil...

'So what am I to do?' Jesus says. 'Come on now, you're the experts. Multiple choice: tick the box: good or evil; saving life or killing. Please Advise me'.

There's no need to phone a friend or to ask the audience. But look at the end of verse 4 ***But they remained silent***. Their silence, of course, is evidence that they knew the answer but didn't want to admit it...

So the stage is set for him to heal, which he does in verse 5: ***5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.***

There is enough in that verse alone to put right a small view of Jesus, isn't there?

Notice for a start that anger is ascribed to Jesus on this occasion. There is a dark side to Jesus' emotions which the Bible records. He is capable of anger, when he faces evil – and it was written all over his face for everyone to see. This is no milky mild Jesus: in the presence of stubborn sinfulness he was angry.

But this anger was not like your or my anger. In Jesus case it went hand in hand with a love for his enemies. How else are we to understand the fact that he was ***'deeply distressed'*** at their sin? It grieved him; it tore at his heart-strings. He loved them at the very same time that he was filled with righteous anger at their sin. He was tender-hearted even in his anger at their hard-heartedness. What a man!

And let's not forget the amazing miracle which happened that day. A hand that had shrivelled must literally have grown before their eyes, if the eyewitness verdict was that the hand was completely restored.

This is a miracle of creation – where matter that had not been in existence suddenly came into being before their eyes. No prosthetic limbs, no skin grafts, no dressings, no lengthy course of treatment.

We do not normally witness miracles like this today; but then we do not have this person physically present with us. We don't see this sort of thing happening now – but that is because we live now not then. We could have seen things like this – we just turned up about 2000 years too late. The amazing miracles that happened in Jesus' lifetime are because he was a one-off – quite unique – the Creator at large within his Creation, suspending the normal laws of that Creation as only he could... What an awesome man, but what an awesome God...

I wonder if you spotted the irony of the closing verse of our section: verse 6 ***6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.***

Jesus set them the question whether it is lawful on the Sabbath to do good or evil; to save life or to kill. He does the good thing; the pro-life thing and heals the man with the withered hand. And the Pharisees promptly walk **off** the stage to fulfil the other options he gave them in his riddle: ***6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.***

So taken as a whole not only does this episode reveal amazing aspects to Jesus' character; his courage; his anger his love; and not only does it reveal his amazing power – a creative miracle, regenerating dead human tissue. You have to say that one other astounding feature of the story is that it brings before us someone with a quite astounding mind as well.

I mean it's pretty obvious who understands the law best in a run-off between Jesus and the Pharisees, the legal experts of the day, isn't it? Jesus proves himself to be the Lord of the Law. The Law giver, the Law interpreter. I wonder whether you and I have acknowledged that as we should.

One spin off which is important is that Jesus Christ as the Lord of the Law is the one who tells us how to apply the laws of Moses today. People often wonder: how are we to relate to the Old Testament Commands today? The answer is not that we try to keep the laws as a way of being good enough for God. We don't even consider them in the first instance as laws to me. As followers of Christ we view all the Laws of the Old Testament through the lordship of Jesus

In other words it's a bit like passing light through a filter or a lens - the lens of Jesus. Imagine that Jesus is like a lens that filters or blocks out some rays of light, and which lets other colours pass through...

In the same way Jesus as Lawgiver and Lord explains which laws stop with him because they have had their fulfilment and which laws continue and how; they pass through him and he gives us their ongoing application.

Some commands find their fulfilment in him and the lens blocks them from passing through. Taken as a whole, I must say that the Sabbath laws as Israel kept them, I think fall into that category. Christians disagree on this, I know, but my view is that the Sabbath rest was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, because his death, which we will remember at communion in a moment, opens a heavenly rest to us. Because he paid the price for our sins he is able to say to us: Come to me, all you who labour and I will give you rest.

In creation the pattern of six days on and one day off is still wise – it's the way we are made. But I don't personally think we are to keep a weekly Sabbath as a law in the way Israel did. And lots of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament are like that. They are fulfilled in Christ and they don't pass through the lens and come out the other side in the same way.

However other laws are plainly re-emphasised in NT: they permanent reflections of character of God. Jesus Lordship repeats them as he speaks through his chosen apostles.

So the rule of thumb is that if repeated in NT, because the New Testament is how we have the voice of Jesus – he speaks through his apostles then those commands are to be obeyed today: So in the test case of Sabbath: there is no command to keep one day special in NT – if anything there is a warning against keeping religious sabbaths. However the Old Testament laws on marriage for example are re-emphasised in the New Testament – intensified even...

The challenge for us then is to give Jesus the status he claims for himself in this episode as our Lawgiver. His word is my command if I am a Christian. And that commits me therefore to search out what he says and what his apostles say in the New Testament and shape my life by it. He is the one who really grasps what the law is all about; if I want to know how to live to please God, I must listen to him – this story demonstrates that.

By contrast, what a hopeless grasp of the law the Pharisees have: the law which supposedly **prevents** Jesus doing good – healing on the Sabbath - **permits** them to do the worst form of evil going – ***“Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.***

How else can you describe that behaviour? It is surely the worst form of evil going. This is evil personified, isn't it? When faced with the most awesome character the world has ever seen the

Pharisees and the Herodians club together to say in effect 'Get out of my life.' That is the utmost evil imaginable.

The frightening thing in that verse is that it is actually a window onto our hearts, not just the Pharisees. The unholy alliance of the Pharisees and the Herodians actually make this point. The Pharisees stand for the religious and the Herodians for the secular. Normally they would have nothing to do with each other. But their common hostility to Jesus brings them together.

Whether we are religious or completely irreligious we all by nature side against Jesus and want him out of the way.

Let's not be sentimental as we come to communion this morning. We are remembering what can only be described as the most shockingly evil act the world has ever seen. And it is evil that we are every bit as capable of as the Pharisees and Herodians were that day.

There is only one way to escape that hard-heated evil – by allowing Jesus to drive that hard-heartedness from us. He is the only one who lived differently and we need him by his Spirit to work that miracle in us.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)