

Homily for Wednesday 18th January 2017

'Keeping the Sabbath Holy'

Given by the Revd. Sarah Shaw

Have you ever had the experience of talking to someone, who appears to be looking at you, has all the appearance of listening – but in fact is miles away, or worse – looking over your shoulder to see who else they could be talking to? And quite possibly, when we're tired or distracted, the guilty one could be us! Or perhaps I mean me...! The point I want to make is that listening is a skill. Some people are born good listeners – you can tell by the way they respond to what you're saying. Others find it really hard to focus – and not because they're rude. Good listening takes practice. It requires a conscious effort.

The ancient Israelites believed that we don't just listen with our ears but with our hearts. So when Jesus is grieved at the Pharisees' hardness of heart in today's Gospel reading he is recognising their lack of listening with their heart – deliberate or not. I wonder what those first Israelites who heard the law given to them by Moses, understood when he said these words from God, which we heard in our first reading: 'Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy'. It goes on to say, of course, that no work should be done – by anyone in the family, or slaves, or resident foreigners, or animals. It's straightforward isn't it? – and there are no exceptions. So it would be generous to say that those Pharisees who were watching Jesus were simply enforcing the law heard by them since infancy - that they must not work on the Sabbath day. What else was there to say on the matter?

Well, for one thing, it's clear from Jesus' response that he knows that it is not from a desire to keep the Sabbath holy that they are watching him. 'Jesus says to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent'. Why the silence? The Pharisees knew the Law, and could have simply restated it. But clearly they were simply looking for any excuse to get Jesus arrested and killed. They knew that what Jesus said was right – that the Sabbath is meant for good, it is meant to be life-giving, not life-sapping. But they use the excuse of the law to justify their hardness of heart.

The thing is, Jesus was in every way inconvenient to them. He challenged authority, exposed hypocrisy among those who were meant to be teachers of the law (clergy – note!), he demanded that those who would follow him would give up everything to do so. Whereas the law received by Moses had been a set of instructions if you only listened with your ears, Jesus was now asking his followers to listen to the law with their hearts. Suddenly the requirement to keep the Sabbath holy was not so much about ‘don’t’ but about ‘do’. To go back to the reading from Exodus: ‘Keep the Sabbath *holy*... rest because it is this is a *blessed* day, it is consecrated to the Lord.’ What could be more holy than imparting wholeness to one who is suffering? What could be more blessed than healing the one who needs it?

As I said the ancient Israelites believed that we don’t just listen with our ears but with our hearts. When we only listen with our ears and not with open hearts, it can be easy for us too, as a church in particular, to let rules and laws to get in the way of doing good to others. Because doing good to others often involves risks.

Let’s pray that *our* hearts would always be open to listening to what God has to say to us, no matters what it requires of us.