**The Rt Revd Paul Ferguson, Bishop of Whitby, reflects on Mark 2.23‐3.6 for the First Sunday after Trinity, 2nd June.**

Hello. Today’s Gospel reading comes from Mark’s early chapters. It tells us about Jesus getting into trouble twice. The first time it’s because when he’s going through a field with his disciples, they pick some grains. The second time, he heals a man with a withered hand. But both of these things happen on a sabbath, and that’s the problem.

Now the sabbath is a gift of God, laid down in the ten commandments. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, it’s against the Old Testament commandment to do any work, and that applies not only to human beings but even to beasts of burden. Everyone takes a rest, because in the first account of creation in Genesis God rests and makes the day holy. Many Jewish people today will make sure that that rest really is a rest by not doing anything that is like work on the sabbath, which includes cooking or operating machinery, and therefore not driving except in a dire emergency.

The gospel tells us that the people who were scandalised by what Jesus and his disciples did belonged to a group called Pharisees. The good side of their ideas was that if you brought God’s law into everyday life, you could make the everyday holy. So far so good: but some of them, who would become Jesus’s enemies, made the sabbath rules into a weapon. Into the category of forbidden work went both separating the seed from the husk and carrying out an act of healing. The Pharisees in the story made common cause with another political group, the supporters of the powerful family of the Herods, to do away with Jesus.

This is the Bible passage that gives us that familiar sentence, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’ Let’s pause a moment, though, because it’s too easy for us to boo the Pharisees as if they were the villains in a pantomime, and not think about how this story is inviting us to look hard at ourselves. Mark is uncompromising in his language. Jesus looks round with anger at the people watching to see whether he would heal the man, so that they could accuse him, as if to say, ‘Go on, Jesus, walk into the trap.’ The text says that Jesus was grieved at the hardness of their hearts: some ancient manuscripts say the deadness of their hearts. Ouch.

There’s a virtue in having a discipline around good religious observance, but it’s quite different, and terrible, when anything to do with faith is turned into a means of control or a way of fighting our personal battles or reinforcing the prejudices and interests of a group to which we belong: and I’m sorry, but this is a danger that can find its way into the life of churches, and sincere Christian people can slip into making wrong use of words or rules or procedures, thinking that we are doing something right, and then the command to love our neighbour as ourselves, to empathise, gets pushed away. Let’s pray for the wisdom to see that danger for what it is, and resist it — and so grow more into the likeness of Christ.

Loving God, we can do no good thing without you. Grant us the help of your grace, that in the true keeping of your commandments we may please you both in will and deed: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.