

Thought for the Day 15th May 2020 Robin Fishwick

Luke 6:1-11

Answering the Why that wanted no reply.

There was water everywhere. The teacher looked down on the culprit who was still holding the empty fire extinguisher. "Why on earth did you do that?". The pupil, a quiet Chinese boy, not known to give in to acts of delinquency, calmly replied, "I was curious, so I pulled the handle". This reply made him a legend among his peers, including Stephen Brown, now vicar at Haslingden, who relayed the story to me years later. Why did the phrase capture the imagination of his classmates? I think the main reason is that it embodied a measured and dignified response to a question that did not want answering. Maybe being a stranger to English culture meant that he had not understood how he was supposed to respond to the teacher's anger. He wasn't supposed to answer the question, he was supposed to hang his head in shame and mumble something unintelligible while the teacher carried on berating him.

I'm reminded of this when I read the question posed to Jesus's disciples "Why are you doing something that is forbidden on the Sabbath day?" The Pharisees were not asking the type of question that elicited a reply, it was the type of question which expressed anger, disapproval and superiority. "Why are you talking to me like that?" "What did you do that for?" "What are you playing at?" The disciples had been caught in the act, plucking ears of corn, rubbing off the husks and eating the kernels. Not a major crime, but a violation of the Sabbath nevertheless. I suspect that had Jesus not been there, the disciples would have dropped the ears, mumbling an apology and the Pharisees would have felt very pleased with themselves. Jesus was there, though, and was able to account for their actions better than they could themselves. His answer was twofold; partly about Scriptures and partly about himself.

He went to Scriptures to cite an instance of when King David broke the rules for good reason. The circumstances were not the same - Jesus' followers were not necessarily as hungry as David's - but I think the point Jesus is making is that Scriptures are not just a book of instructions, but also an account of how people seeking to serve God have to practice discernment in prioritising one commandment over another when they are in conflict. It is ironic that these days in the secular world, the term "Bible" is used to mean "ultimate instruction manual" as in books with such titles as "The 12 Volt Bible" or "The Allotment Pocket Bible", while the original Bible is a far more complex collection of writings from which people can see the complexity of human experience and draw different conclusions. In one Gospel account Jesus even weighs common sense against Scriptural commandment - would you let one of your animals drown if it fell down a well on the Sabbath?

The second part of Jesus' reply takes the challenge back to those Pharisees. His disciples may not be the best of the bunch, they might not be as strict in religious observance as the Pharisees and Scribes, they might not be as ascetic in their lifestyle as John the Baptist's followers, but they have recognised him, have opened their hearts to him and recognised God's Holy Spirit at work in him, while the Pharisees, who of all people should know what God looks like, can only see Jesus as a threat to their faith. Jesus is not going to have his disciples bullied by those who are blinded by self-righteousness, or are so bound by convention they fail to follow the adventurous promptings of the Living God.

But I would finally like to present a "Why" of my own. Why do the Pharisees make such a fuss about the Sabbath? And part of the reason I ask this is because it sometimes does us good to remind us that we are not beyond making mistakes ourselves. It is far too easy to read the New Testament and think the Pharisees behave the way they do because they are just stupid or worse, because they are not like us (therein lies one of the roots of Christian anti-Semitism). It is always helpful to read the New Testament and try to understand the Pharisees, because we need to learn to guard against making the same mistakes ourselves. One of the reasons I believe that the Pharisees got so hung up on the minutiae of their faith was that we sometimes confuse what is

distinctive about our faith with what is crucial or central to it. Studying comparative religion can sometimes lead us into the same confusion- we can learn about our differences in when we hold our Sabbath or what we are allowed to eat and think that is what makes us who we are. What is crucial to our faith, though, is not our badge of identity, especially not the “us” we belong to, but our own unique relationship with Spirit and Truth.

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