

It's always lawful



to do good

There are many stories in the Gospels of confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, like the ones in today's reading. It's too easy to write off these confrontation stories.

Those stories are just about Jesus and the Pharisees or the teachers of the Law.

Those stories are about the causes of the crucifixion, and we live in the post resurrection, post ascension, world of the Spirit.

Those stories are about issues of the Law, and we live under grace.

Or we can tend to look at them like old-fashioned Westerns – the black hats and the white hats – and sagely nod that the Pharisees are all in the

wrong.

But the Gospel writers didn't put these stories in their telling of Jesus' life just to show the tensions and acrimony that led to the cross. These stories stand as stark warning to the church in every generation to not make rules and laws that cut across God's will for life.

The Pharisees complained that the disciples were, in effect, harvesting as they walked through the fields. The Laws that they maintained and insisted on meant that the Sabbath was more important than feeding the hungry.

They complained that Jesus was going to heal a man on the Sabbath, enforcing an understanding that the Sabbath was more important than someone's health.

And Jesus replies, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath". The very concept of Sabbath is about quality of life; endlessly working, or expecting your servants to endlessly work, is not a quality life. The Pharisees understood the value of Sabbath as a Law, and a set of interpretations of the Law around what constituted work, but they didn't understand that God's will for life was more important than obeying a set of Laws. But don't dress them in black hats so quickly, because are we any better? All the splits in the church over the millennia are due to our attempts to turn faith into rules and laws. We might call them doctrines, but if we enforce them then they're laws, and we have forgotten the confrontation stories in the Gospels and Jesus call for compassion and grace.

Sabbath – resting on the seventh day – was an important law for the people of Israel. As well as duty and obedience to God, it was a mark of identity that made them different to the surrounding cultures. It was no wonder that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were so intent on enforcing that particular Law. But in their zeal, they forgot the heart of the Law – love. On a day of rest, gathered in the synagogue in worship, what is more natural than being healed? It wouldn't be what I would call work. And yet, despite these confrontation stories, the Puritans of the 17th century enforced strict observance of Sabbath. Ideas that still live today in cultural ideas of proper behaviour on Sunday.

While in the UK, the tour group I was with attended two services in what we would label as Evangelical Anglican churches. You would be hard pressed to identify them as Anglican or distinguish them from Baptist. The services didn't follow the standard

liturgy that I was taught at college was the 'proper' way to order a service of worship. The sanctuaries weren't laid out in any 'proper' way to emphasise the sacraments. But I couldn't deny the life and joy and worship that was obvious in those two services. Two churches packed with people of all ages worshipping God. Our rules of how to organise a service shouldn't get in the way of the emotions of worship.

Many years ago, in Youth group, I organised a Bible Study night with the title "How to be a Pharisee"! Naively, with no thought to how unfair that was to Jewish people or to a balanced understanding of the religious leaders of ancient Israel, I thought it was a simple matter of taking a passage of scripture and turning it into a law that had to be obeyed by all good people of faith. The acrimony over the last two decades about the place of alternate sexualities in church has shown that I wasn't too far off the mark. It has clearly been about taking scripture and making laws out of the words of writers from thousands of years ago in different cultures. Do we not have the same tendencies as the Pharisees of the Gospel stories? Carried away by zeal for what we see as the Word of God, instead of being carried away by zeal for love and compassion and grace, just as Jesus was.

These stories of Jesus confronting the religious leaders of his day should continue to challenge us. To confront us with the life changing grace of God that mocks religious rule making. Jesus said that he came that we might have life and have it in abundance. So, let's make sure that the way we live, the way we organise ourselves, the way we welcome people, and the way share ourselves with the world is governed by grace and not by a set of rules. It is always lawful to do good. Amen