

Mark 3: 1-6

Pymble 11.3.18

***The Common Good***

I thought it might be interesting to look at the baptism of Lachlan and Harley this morning in light of the story we have just read from Mark's gospel. I think this will be helpful not just for their families but for all of us who seek to follow Jesus or even just desire to live a good life.

I guess the main thing I want to emphasise is that we have not baptized these two "into religion" but into a way of life; into the way of Jesus. In some ways, there is the 'religion' thing – the parents can now tick the Christian or the Uniting Church box on the census form – but as we see in the story today, the religious mindset can be a dangerous thing and in itself, religion doesn't make someone a better person.

The Pharisees – one of the 4 main Jewish groups of the day – were well-known for their religious rigour. They have been clashing with Jesus over how he understands life and God and that conflict continues in this episode in the synagogue where Jesus heals a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath. The Pharisees claim that such healing constituted work, which was not permitted on the Sabbath. That may seem crazy to us, but these controversies went to the heart of how life was meant to be lived, the interpretation of holy Scriptures and who understood God best.

So if we were to identify characteristics of religious people based on these Pharisees, I wonder what we would see? We would have to include

- being more concerned for laws and customs than for the welfare of people
- closed mindedness – for they had already made up their minds about Jesus and were looking for a way to accuse him
- an inability to hear the logic that God would prefer to see good occur over a strict interpretation of a law
- and an unwillingness to rejoice

at the life-giving healing of a man's disabling condition

Religion, when separated from love and compassion,  
can take us down a dark and cold-hearted path  
where rules and regulations loom larger than the needs of people,  
where our acceptance of others  
is based on their ability to meet certain standards,  
and where we tend to label anything that we don't understand  
as evil or suspicious.  
But as this story reveals,  
to place religious scruples above human need is not pleasing to God.

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I was listening to a podcast this week –  
an interview with Patricia Lockwood,  
a writer whose father had a dramatic conversion experience as an adult  
and subsequently is one of the few married Catholic priests –  
having already had a family prior to his conversion  
and desire to be ordained.  
But this arrangement provided Patricia with a unique vantage point  
into the Church and the senior clergy who would visit their home.  
And her sad reflection on these religious people  
was that they are so used to being venerated by their flock,  
and so full of their own importance  
that they simply didn't notice others around them.  
They never thanked her mother  
for the many meals she provided  
and they would not even acknowledge a young Patricia in the room –  
to the extent that they would reveal things in front of her  
that she probably shouldn't have heard.  
She had some positive things to say about her father  
and his commitment to those in need,  
but she was scathing of the religion where little people become invisible.

This has been something of a theme for me this week  
as I have just finished Graham Long's book, *Love Over Hate*.  
As the pastor of The Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross,  
Graham sees many little people and their needs.  
He also sees the way most of society deals with that need.  
I guess the heart of his message is a critique  
that as we become increasingly individualized;  
as we become so privatized in our own little worlds  
there is rarely any chance to truly meet another person;  
to be fully present with them and see them as people.  
And if you have heard his *Inner Circle* stories –  
sometimes read out on the ABC –

then you will hear examples of his busy day being interrupted by needy folk, and him, often reluctantly at first, taking time to listen to and really engage homeless, psychotic, angry, or alcoholic people and finding within them a great capacity to bless him with their humanity as he also blesses them with his. And part of his concern is that religion can often be the greatest culprit in terms of setting up barriers to stop the true meeting of human beings – that meeting place where God is often found. I think Jesus would have agreed.

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And so if it is the way of Jesus into which we baptize these children today, what does that Way look like?

A few things suggest themselves from the story:

- firstly, a compassionate desire to help and heal those in need, recognizing their humanity and regardless of what the rules or customs may say.
- secondly, an unwillingness to concede to religious pressure – after all Jesus could have just waited until sunset when the Sabbath was considered over, but clearly the man's need, and perhaps the principle at stake, was too great for Jesus to back down. The way of Jesus isn't always simply keeping the peace and glossing over important issues.

- And then I also hope you can see 2 unexpected things that are part of the Way of Jesus:  
**anger and grief.**

When Jesus called the man forward, he said to the Pharisees, *"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath; to save life or to kill?"* And they were silent.

And then the author writes,

*"Jesus looked around at them **with anger**; he **was grieved** at their hardness of heart..."*

Strong words.

Maybe it was anger that the very people who should have understood God's ways best, were so far away from them; and perhaps his grief stemmed from them having such tightly closed minds to anything new.

Anger and grief are powerful motivators, and perhaps we need a little more of them to overcome our complacency at so much injustice in the world.

Friends, we may not see ourselves as religious bigots like the Pharisees, intent on a strict interpretation of rules and regulations regardless of the negative consequences for people,

but there is often a bit of the Pharisee within us all:  
a lack of compassion for others;  
and a desire to retreat into the safety of black and white rules  
when often lives are not nearly so neat and tidy;  
These things might not make us Pharisees,  
but they often stop us from engaging people with  
the kindness and concern that their circumstances warrant.

And so drawing once more on baptism imagery,  
may we die to those parts within ourselves that draw back from people,  
and may we rise up to the new life of compassion and love  
as revealed in the life of Jesus.  
Not all of religion is bad,  
but all of the way of Jesus is life-giving for everyone.