

Over the last two weeks we looked at the authority of Jesus to teach, to drive out demons, to forgive sins and to heal people. Today we are looking at the theme, "The spiritual freedom which we have in Christ." When Christ comes into our life he changes everything and gives us tremendous freedom. Many a time we as Christians follow Jesus legalistically rather than out of love. Our faith becomes one of 'do's' and 'don'ts' or a set of rules and regulations. We think that when we follow these rules religiously then we are doing alright. However, following Jesus is a relationship. It is something where we get to know Jesus more intimately and therefore we keep the laws or commands out of gratitude and love. We should never think of our faith as though it was just about commands and laws.

During the time of Jesus the Scribes and Pharisees followed the law meticulously but had forgotten the very purpose of the law. In the gospel reading for this morning we notice two such incidents that take place on the Sabbath. The first one is when Jesus and his disciples were going through the grain fields. As they were walking along through the fields the disciples plucked and ate some of the heads of grain. The Pharisees who witnessed this were offended by what the disciples did. They believed that the disciples had broken the law of the Sabbath which prohibited them from doing any work on that day. The principle of Sabbath keeping was agreed by all the Jews, though there were problems over what it meant in practice. The Old Testament tells us that it was a time of rest, together with the injunction that no work must be done. However, the Pharisees developed an extensive set of laws to leave nothing to chance. At its heart lay thirty-nine prohibitive acts and one of them was 'reaping'. So the Pharisees considered the disciples act of plucking grain and eating them as reaping. Therefore they complained to Jesus about the unlawful act that the disciples did on the Sabbath.

Jesus answers them by citing the example of David and his men who were hungry and went to Abiathar and asked him for food. The high priest gave them the bread of the Presence which was not lawful for anyone but the priests to eat. The bread of Presence was always removed on the Sabbath day (Leviticus 24:8). The argument is that if David and his men broke the Sabbath for the sake of human need, how much more can Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath work for the good of human beings on the Sabbath. Jesus is teaching them that the value for human life takes precedence over the Sabbath laws. Jesus shows them that the Sabbath was made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath.

In the second incident which follows this, Jesus enters into the synagogue and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Jesus makes that man stand up and asks the people, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" The people remained silent and did not give any answer. Jesus was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, and he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." The man stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. This annoyed the Pharisees and they went out and began to plot with the Herodians as to how they could kill him.

In both these incidents Jesus shows himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath. While it was true that God had asked them to keep the Sabbath as day of rest, it was not to be observed legalistically. The Pharisees went to extreme and made numerous laws to make sure that the law would not be broken. They had forgotten the spirit of the law and were therefore upset when a man was healed on a Sabbath Day.

Many a time we too are like the Pharisees and the Scribes. We follow Christ very legalistically and we do not have the spiritual freedom that Christ offers us. We are called to celebrate this freedom that we have, rather than judging others legalistically. Yes, the Sabbath needs to be kept as a reminder of all that God has done for us. We are called to set apart that day for rest and worship. We need to enjoy the spiritual freedom that God has given us in Christ.