

Closing Prayer

God, our freedom,
you set aside this holy day
that we may remember our liberation
and rest from our labours.
Make this day a healing time
for all that is weary and withered in us,
and in our bodily celebration,
manifest among us the life of Jesus the risen One,
who is with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Celebrating the Christian Year · Proper 4, Year B²

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² *Celebrating the Christian year : prayers and resources for Sundays, holy days and festivals, years A, B and C / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-5.*

Proper 4

*Sunday between 29 May and 4 June inclusive, if after Trinity
Sunday · Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

Principal Service readings

Deuteronomy 5.12-15	Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy
Psalms 81.1-10	Praise God who has rescued his people
2 Corinthians 4.5-12	Treasure in clay jars
Mark 2.23—3.6	Importance of the Sabbath and doing good

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Picking corn on the Sabbath

²³One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' ²⁵And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' ²⁷Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'

Cure of a man with a withered hand

'Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' ⁴Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was

restored. ‘The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Mark 2.23—3.6 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

With this fourth controversy the debate shifts from forgiveness of sins and table fellowship with habitual sinners to Sabbath observance.

Jesus’ disciples seem to violate a law, or rather, the Pharisees’ interpretation of the law (2.23-24). Jesus reminds them of an incident in the life of David, a much-respected figure – David’s companions entered the house of God and ate bread reserved for the priests (Exodus 25.23). Clearly hunger takes precedence over ritual prohibitions. Jesus declares an extraordinary proclamation of freedom: ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (2.27), too much of a challenge for Matthew and Luke who omit the story from their gospels. Here, it is a harbinger of ‘restorationist’ eschatology, preparing for a return to the original will of God at creation.

The ultimate meaning of the religious rules about the Sabbath are to ensure we rest (and that others do too), and to acknowledge that God is the source of our existence, not to subject us to slavery.

In the fifth and last controversy (3.1-6) Jesus shows his anger towards his opponents, and only here do they plan to destroy him. The incident with the man with the withered hand actually takes place in a synagogue (3.1-2). The man with the withered hand doesn’t make a request for healing. In fact, the critics also stay silent (3.4), and only Jesus speaks. The incident foreshadows the opposition to Jesus that will continue to grow from now until the trial before the Sanhedrin and Roman authorities when charges against Jesus will result in his death.

What is Mark saying to the church about a changing understanding of God and traditional practices?

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Quotations

1

A world without a Sabbath would be like a man without a smile, like a summer without flowers, and like a homestead without a garden. It is the most joyous day of the week.

Henry Ward Beecher, 1813–1887

2

Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms.

Walter Brueggemann, 1933–

3

The letter kills the spirit. The written text is mute in the face of responding challenge. It does not admit of inward growth and correction. Text subverts the absolutely vital role of memory.

George Steiner, 1929–2020

4

Christian morality (so called) has all the characters of a reaction; it is, in great part, a protest against Paganism. Its ideal is negative rather than positive; passive rather than action; innocence rather than Nobleness; Abstinence from Evil, rather than energetic Pursuit of Good: in its precepts (as has been well said) ‘thou shalt not’ predominates unduly over ‘thou shalt’.

On liberty / John Stuart Mill. 1859

Related topics

For further study:

The law: letter versus spirit; scripture and tradition; morality; moral decision making; Jesus, Son of God and Messiah; commandments; social justice; covenant; the Lord’s Day: Sunday