

## RELIGION THAT'S REAL

### Mark 3:1–6

Mark's Gospel introduces us to Jesus. At the very start Mark puts his cards on the table and tells us that Jesus is good news. Chapter one describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his baptism, the calling of the first disciples, his teaching and his miracles. News about Jesus spread quickly, and it was good news. The power of God was coming. Evil was on the run. People who were sick were being cured.

All the way through chapter 1 it's a story of increasing fame. Verse 28: 'News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.' Verse 33: 'The whole town gathered at the door.' Verse 37: 'When [his companions] found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"' Verse 45: 'Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.'

When we move into chapter 2 these activities are still going on but now there's a new theme. A sinister note begins to sound. If Mark were writing today I'm sure his Gospel would be a screen play rather than a book and the background music, the lighting and the camera angles would reflect the change in atmosphere between chapter 1 and chapter 2.

Suddenly a different reaction to Jesus emerges. Critical thoughts begin to formulate in some people's minds and all too soon those critical thoughts become critical words and as like-minded people get together to voice their opinions those criticisms become plans, plans to silence Jesus and get rid of him completely.

Verses 6 and 7: 'Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming!"' Verse 16: 'When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and "sinners"?"' Verses 23 and 24: 'One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"'

The climax comes in chapter 3 verse 6. 'Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.'

Who were these people and why did they hate Jesus so much?

Who were the Pharisees? If you look up the word 'Pharisee' in the Old Testament you won't find it. You'll read about patriarchs, priests, prophets and kings but you won't find any Pharisees. That's because they only emerged during the 200 or so years before the coming of Christ. In Jesus' day they were a national organisation, about 6000 of them. They would meet in many smaller local groups though the largest group met in Jerusalem. Some of them were professional students of the Old Testament, the Teachers of the Law, but others had ordinary jobs.

Historically they emerged as a reaction to some of the worst aspects of Old Testament history. For centuries the Israelites had been led astray and worshipped idols instead of the living God. The Pharisees were determined to apply God's law to the life of the nation, to contribute a purifying influence, to explain the Law and leave no doubt about what it meant to obey God. The Law said, 'Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.' The Pharisees said, 'Now what does that mean – exactly? If you go for a walk how far can you go before it's breaking the Sabbath? If you're carrying something at what point does it become work? They had good intentions but all too often the result was a set of additional rules and regulations which tied people in knots and made obeying God seem impossibly complicated.

Jesus cut through all that man-made clutter. When a Pharisee once asked him what was the greatest command in the Law Jesus said 'Love God. Love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second most important is this: love your neighbour.' The whole law could be summed up in just these two commands: love God and love your neighbour.

The Pharisees had spent hours and days and weeks and months and years and decades working out how the Law should be applied in every last detail. Jesus threw all that out. 'You don't need that,' he said. 'Just love God and love your neighbour.' Suddenly everything the Pharisees had worked so hard for was obsolete and foolish.

What made things worse was that Jesus' actions as well as his words undermined their authority and status. Jesus spoke to a paralysed man and said, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' The teachers of the Law were thinking, 'That's blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins.' So Jesus said, 'Do you know how easy it is for me to forgive sins? It's easier than telling this paralysed man to get up and walk. So I'll do the more difficult thing. I'll tell him to get up, take up his mat and walk out. That way you'll know that I really do have the authority to forgive sins.' Then he turned to the cripple and said, 'I'm speaking to you now. Get up, take up your mat, and go home.' And the man did just that.

Jesus called Levi, a tax collector, to be his disciple. Levi threw a party and invited all his ne'er-do-well friends. And Jesus actually sat down at the table with them. It was a scandal. Jesus said, 'It's not healthy people who need a doctor. It's sick people.'

The next thing that happened was that all the seriously religious people were fasting – that is, not eating. But Jesus' disciples were not fasting. Jesus said, 'There's nothing wrong with fasting but right now it's not appropriate for them to be fasting. If you're at a wedding and the bridegroom arrives you don't mark the occasion by fasting. You have a celebration. It's feasting not fasting. Jesus said, 'I'm here. It's a new beginning. It's a time to celebrate.'

Soon after Jesus and his followers were walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath Day. As they walked along the disciples were picking some heads of grain. There were some Pharisees nearby and they said, 'Gotcha this time! Look, what they're doing is unlawful on the Sabbath.'

The whole thing came to a head in the incident recorded in chapter 3 verses 1 to 6. It happened in the synagogue, the place where the Jews met to worship. It happened on a Sabbath day. There was a man there with a shrivelled hand. Verse 2 says, 'Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.' What would happen next?

There was a safe option. The man's condition was not life-threatening. One more day would make little difference. Jesus could have arranged to meet him privately somewhere in secret. But what did Jesus do? Verse 3: 'Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."' I can imagine the disciples exchanging anxious glances and saying under their breath, 'Here we go, boys...'

Then Jesus spoke again. 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' It was a masterly question because it was all about the Law. They would have framed the question differently. Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do work or to abstain from work? They would have said the lawful thing in this situation was to do nothing. But Jesus didn't allow that option. 'To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill.'

He turned the tables on them. He forced them to choose between the good he intended to do and the evil they wanted to do; the life he wanted to restore and the death they were plotting to arrange.

Jesus stared them down and said, 'Which?' And Mark tells us they were silent.

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus was angry. The reason for his anger was their hardness of heart. This is language from the Law: not the Ten Commandments or the tabernacle or the sacrifices but the first eleven chapters of Exodus; not words about Moses or Aaron or even the people but words about godless Pharaoh, who hardened his heart against the word of God and refused to acknowledge the will of God. It is a scathing criticism and a biting irony.

Turning away from his critics Jesus turned back to the handicapped man. 'Stretch out your hand,' he said. He stretched it out and his hand was completely restored.

At this point we've come to expect Mark telling us that the crowds were amazed or that Jesus' fame spread still wider, but now the atmosphere has changed and changed for ever. 'Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.'

There's one final irony here. The Pharisees went out to plot how they might kill Jesus. That's bad enough but notice who with – the Herodians. The Herodians were not a religious group but more of a political party. Normally the last people the Pharisees would have made an alliance with were the Herodians. Like Herod himself, his supporters were only interested in power. They didn't have a religious bone in their bodies. They were the very opposite of everything that the Pharisees stood for. But if the Pharisees were going to get rid of Jesus they needed the support of the Herodians.

When you reject Jesus you don't drift into no man's land; you don't adopt a neutral position. If you are not for him you are against him. If the love and truth of Jesus is not lifting you up the law of gravity of sin and evil will bring you down.

Because we're here this morning many people would say we're religious – those church goers, those religious people. The challenge of this passage is to examine the reality of our religion. Is it just the straitjacket of formal rules and traditions which produce an ethos of condemnation and self-righteousness? Or is it the life-giving love of Jesus which sees beyond the conventions of religion to real people and real needs and real answers?