

New wine

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, 7 October 2018

Readings:

Psalm 42:1-5

1 Corinthians 3:1-11

Mark 2: 23-3:6

‘No one puts new wine into old wineskins ...’

That’s the verse directly preceding today’s reading from Mark’s gospel.

‘... no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins.’ (Mk 2:22)

It’s a fitting metaphor for the coming of Jesus into the world, as depicted in Mark’s gospel, the earliest of all four gospels. Something new is happening, something unprecedented.

Let’s see how the beginning of Mark’s gospel sets the scene for the debate about the sabbath.

Mark’s gospel begins when Jesus’ ministry begins. The purpose of the author is set out at the very beginning. In Mark 1:1 we read:

‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’.

‘Good news’ is what we also translate as ‘gospel’ – in Greek, *εὐαγγέλιον* (*evangelion*). The coming of Jesus is good news, and it was foretold by the prophets, we read. John the Baptist was actively preparing the way for Jesus by baptising in the wilderness, calling people to repentance (*metanoia* – turning around) and pronouncing the forgiveness of sins. To Jewish hearers and readers, the wilderness was the place where God worked with and for the people of God, saving them in miraculous ways. So something very special was about to happen.

Jesus comes to John and is baptised by him. By allowing himself to be baptised by John, Jesus shows that he is fully human. But when the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus, and ‘a voice from heaven’ proclaims: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’, it is clear that Jesus is also of God.

Mark then says that the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. There, Jesus is subjected to a spiritual battle, in which he prevails.

Jesus returns to begin proclaiming the good news – the message that ‘the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God (the reign of God) is near’. You might ask: What does that mean? Mark’s intention is to show us that in Jesus we can see what the reign of God looks like.

After this, still in Chapter One, Jesus chooses his first disciples, and on the sabbath he begins to teach in the synagogue of Capernaum. People are astounded, ‘for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.’ They are doubly astounded when Jesus proceeds to drive ‘an unclean spirit’ out of a man. ‘A new teaching – with authority!’ they exclaim. It becomes clear that the authority exercised by this new teacher is not just the authority of learning and knowledge, but a spiritual authority. Countless further healings of body and mind follow in Chapters One and Two.

In the time of Jesus, physical and spiritual health were seen to go hand in hand – physical ill health and mental ill health were both seen to stem from destructive spiritual forces and/or some sin that the afflicted person had committed. Physical healing and spiritual healing are thus inseparable. Jesus says he heals a paralysed man ‘so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’. The healing of the whole person fuses with the healing of the person’s relationship to God. But for the religious leaders, this is blasphemy.

Jesus does not behave as a religious teacher is expected to. He eats with sinners, and his disciples do not fast when all others do. ‘No one puts new wine into old wineskins ...’ The religious leaders increasingly challenge Jesus.

So how do the first one and a half chapters of Mark’s gospel set the scene for the debate about the sabbath?

At the beginning of Mark’s account we see that the ‘gospel’ – the good news – has to do with the whole of Jesus’s ministry on earth and not solely with Jesus’s death and resurrection. Everything in the gospel is about healing and restoration, about new life. Like new wine, Jesus is bursting the old skins of a particular kind of religious observance

to reveal grace. The crux of God's dealings with humanity, Jesus implies, is God's longing to forgive, heal and renew humanity. That comes through clearly in Mark Chapters One and Two.

The Pharisees – the religious leaders who debate with Jesus on the sabbath – were a group of Jewish men who strove to fulfill the letter of the law, including its humanitarian provisions, as fully as possible. They set themselves apart from other people to avoid contamination and gave away one tenth of everything they had. The Pharisees sincerely believed that by living this way they could help to hasten the coming of the promised Messiah. They believed that the sabbath helped preserve the life-giving order established by God in creation – as in Genesis 1, which describes God as 'resting' on the seventh 'day'.

The Pharisees object to the disciples plucking ears of wheat on the sabbath – a minor infringement in the scheme of things. They know Jesus is right in pointing out how David ate the bread of the Presence when he was on the run. They know Deuteronomy 5, which outlines the purpose of the sabbath commandment as being to allow everyone – including the slaves and the domestic animals – to rest from their labour. When Jesus reminds them that '[t]he sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath', they can agree. Such arguments with reference to Scripture were the bread and butter of rabbinic discourse.

In this scene, the sabbath law itself is not the real problem. The Pharisees are using the law to try to corner Jesus, thus making the sabbath law something oppressive rather than life-giving. That's the real issue. The Pharisees see Jesus as a threat to the good order guaranteed by the law – a wild card, someone they cannot contain. His evident authority in teaching – provocatively underlined by Jesus in his conclusion that 'the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath' – unsettles them. In fact, Jesus' authority threatens the very basis of the Pharisees' conviction that their acerbic observance of God's law puts them in good standing with God. Jesus exposes the pointlessness of their self-justification.

Have you ever had the feeling that someone is constructing an argument to counter your position on something, and no matter how much you point out that there is no reason to disagree, you get nowhere? You know that feeling that you can't win, no matter what you

say? Have *you – we* – ever used a very small issue to push back against someone, to gain points over them, when the issue itself is not really an issue at all? When perhaps something far deeper is at play, something that threatens your foundations in some way? This can happen in churches, too.

The same type of friction is evident in the following verses of Mark 2, in the account of Jesus healing the man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the sabbath. Again, the Pharisees are lying in wait. Jesus poses a question that must seem purely rhetorical, because the answer is clear to all of them: ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life, or to kill?’ The Pharisees know that it is lawful to save life on the sabbath. What better day could there be on which to heal than the one day of the week that embodies God’s creative work in the world, God’s transformative grace and healing? Yet Jesus provokes their ire when he heals the man. Jesus is angry and ‘grieved by the Pharisees’ hardness of heart’. Yes, Jesus has emotions, just as we do.

In this encounter, too, God’s life-giving law is being used as a weapon. The Pharisees begin to conspire against Jesus, joining forces with people close to the dreaded King Herod. For Jesus, this is the beginning of the end.

In these debates about the sabbath, Jesus does not assail Judaism. He does not reject the law. He does not disrespect the Pharisees. As one commentator puts it, the passage ‘emphasises a commitment to life and vitality abiding at the heart of God’s reign, [but] it also illustrates how religious commitments and values – *any* religious commitments and values – can ossify [harden] and turn oppressive in the hands of careless stewards. None are immune’ (Prof. Matt Skinner, NT professor at the Lutheran Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota, USA).

‘*Any* religious commitments and values can harden and turn oppressive in the hands of careless stewards. None are immune.’

Certainly the early Christian church in Corinth knew what it was like for ‘religious commitments and values’ to harden and turn oppressive. Paul grieved for them over the divisions caused by the factionalism that had arisen in the church. The ‘new wine’ of the Christian gospel was being stored in old wineskins.

Paul does not seem to have any disagreement with what Apollos was preaching. He emphasises that both he and Apollos have worked in the congregation to the same ends, one sowing the seeds of the gospel, one spiritually nurturing the community that sprung up as a result. So it was probably not the content of Paul's and Apollos's teaching that caused the division. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 1, Paul links the factionalism in the church to the baptism of its members. It is quite likely that factions arose around the erroneous belief that being baptised by a particular leader in the church somehow linked a person to that leader in a spiritual way ('I belong to Paul', 'I belong to Apollos'). Corinth was a melting-pot of different influences from East and West, and its residents would have been exposed to several of the so-called 'mystery cults' that thrived at the time – such as the cult of Isis, or the cult of Mithras. A number of these involved rituals akin to baptism, in which the ritual created an insoluble bond between the baptiser and the baptised.

It's easy to see how the influence of the mystery cults could have led to misunderstandings in the Christian community in Corinth as to what actually happened in baptism. Instead of creating an indissoluble link to Christ, and Christ alone, the Corinthian Christians may have viewed baptism as creating human links, and it seems that rivalry was the result. The Corinthian church was, as Paul says, reverting to a 'purely human' state. New wine in old wineskins.

It's not hard to imagine that some people might have cultivated differing identities (being of Apollos, being of Paul) as a way of cementing existing divisions – divisions created by old feuds, power struggles and envy, for example. People were using their 'religious commitments and values' to set themselves apart from others, turning these commitments and values into oppressive instruments of division – just as the Pharisees used the sabbath law as a pretext for oppressing Jesus.

I recall being told more than once by church leaders in Solomon Islands, when I was there three years ago, that the many breakaways from established churches often had nothing to do with differences in doctrine or ways of worship, even though doctrines were usually cited as the reasons for the split. Instead, the split reflected family feuds or grievances within the respective villages and church communities.

Are we immune to such misuse of the faith in the LCA? Or we personally? I fear not. One thing that has concerned me in the whole discussion surrounding the ordination of women has been the constant appeal to the preservation of unity: the church must not be split. It's true that a split church is never desirable. And naturally, the painful memories of a time when there were two Lutheran churches in Australia continue to surface. The fear of division stems from a fear that a change to existing policy regarding ordination could drive people away. But there is a danger that the call to unity could be used as a pretext to achieve a certain result, such as preventing change. In this case, the fear of division could prevent us from being open to the future that God has for us – whatever that may look like – causing us instead to look backwards in a kind of paralysis, in truly human fashion. Again, new wine in old wineskins.

Paul responds to the Corinthians by stressing repeatedly that it is God who gives the growth. The church is 'God's building', a cosmic reality, filled and moved by the Spirit, who will take it where God wants it to go. It is not ours to control. We can let go of our fears. The church in Corinth and the LCA are each part of God's Church, built not on a foundation of allegiance to various human leaders, or a foundation of unity preserved at all costs, but on one foundation only – that of Jesus Christ.

Paul warns us that 'each builder must choose with care how to build on' that foundation. If we make decisions out of the fear of division, doesn't that mean we are building the church with crumbling mortar? Is it not then bound to break apart, just as the new wine will burst the old wineskins?

To 'build on the foundation of Christ': we can say that phrase glibly, but what does it look like? I believe our reading from Mark's gospel, and indeed, the whole of Mark's gospel, points to the answer in the story of Jesus. So let's return briefly to the gospel of Mark for clues to what 'building on the foundation of Jesus Christ' means.

Right from the start, Mark's presentation of 'the good news – the gospel – of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' goes to the heart of that gospel:

1. Jesus is fully human and yet filled with divine authority.

As the body of Christ, the Church is filled with human beings but also with the Spirit of God. It is not ours to possess.

2. Jesus lives the ‘good news’ by healing people in mind, body and soul, bringing about repentance – ‘metanoia’ – and granting forgiveness. His transforming, healing life foreshadows the resurrection and provides a glimpse of the reign of God in the here and now.

The Church should be a place of healing for the whole person, a place of grace, love and transformation, in which people realise the need to ‘turn around’ – to repent, turning to life in all its fullness and accepting forgiveness.

The Church lives in resurrection hope and provides a glimpse of the reign of God in this world by confronting situations in which rules, institutions and instruments of power are stunting life and being used to invoke fear.

3. By exercising divine authority in healing people and living a grace-centred life, Jesus inevitably walks toward the cross – as we see in the passage about the sabbath.

The Church is to be salt and light in the world – not conformed to it. Our compassion and engagement with those in need may cause us to speak up in ways that are not comfortable. We are a pilgrim people, continually on the move.

I’ll close with the words of Bishop David Altus, Bishop of the LCA SA/NT District, in a sermon delivered at the General Synod last Thursday:

‘So we go into the unknown today with the God we do know:

- who has freed us, and brought and kept us together in the past
- who is always with us and one step ahead of us at the same time
- who is unstoppable and who calls us to get in behind him and [go] where he is going!
- who leads his people in paths we would never choose for ourselves.
- [whom] we know in Jesus, whose living body we are, and whose crucified and risen body we ... receive in bread and wine, and take with us into the day.’

AMEN

(Glenine Hamlyn)