

Introduction

Who likes holidays? Why?

Who doesn't like holidays? Why?

Holidays are good for us.

They are even good for God and he invented them.

Genesis, the first book in our Bibles, tells us how God made everything in the 6 days of creation. He made the sun, the moon, the stars and everything in the heavens. And he made the earth and everything that lives on it, all the plants and animals and birds and sea-creatures. Last of all he made people, human beings who bear his image and who are like him in a way that no other creatures are. And when he had finished all his work God looked at what he had made and saw that it was very good.

So on the 7th day God rested from all his work, and he blessed the 7th day and made it a holy day – what we now call a holiday [Gen 2:3]. He set it apart from the other days to be a special day to rest and to enjoy all that he had made.

Now God decided that what was good for him was also good for the people he had made in his image. It is good for us to be creative workers, just like God. And it is good for us to have time to rest and enjoy what we have done and, even more importantly, to enjoy what he has done.

In due course God chose the people of Israel to be his special people, so that they would come to know him really well and show to everyone else how good it is to live in obedience to him. So he made sure that they knew how important it was to have a holiday every week. There would be other holidays too, by the way, but for one day every week he told the people of Israel to stop all their work and business and have a rest. That day was called the Sabbath and was the day we now call Saturday. It was to be a day of joy and fellowship with God and his people: a day especially to remember God, to thank him for the good gifts with which he had blessed them, and to listen to what he said to them through his prophets and teachers.

As time went by, some people began to ask just what they could and could not do on the Sabbath. Was it OK to walk to the next village to see their cousins, or did that mean they weren't resting as they should? Could mum mend that torn shirt, or was that doing work? You see they wanted to make sure that they were obeying God properly, so they tried to answer all sorts of questions like this. Gradually they added more and more rules and interpretations to what God had told them, so that in the end many people found that instead of the Sabbath being a day of rest and celebration, it had turned into a day for keeping strictly to a whole load of rules. What God intended to be a blessing had become a burden. And to make things worse there were some people who thought it was their job to keep an eye on everyone else to make sure they were keeping those rules, though they weren't so keen to help them do it.

So it's not surprising that when Jesus comes along, these same people get very upset. You see he doesn't care a bit about all these pernicky man-made rules, but he does care a lot about keeping God's commands. He wants to set people free from struggling under the burden that all this tradition has laid on their backs, so that they can enjoy once more the rest that God intends. And he knows exactly what that means because he is the man who is also God.

Exposition

[1] One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and his disciples began to pick some ears of corn, rub them in their hands and eat the grain. [2] Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

So what's the problem here? Is it that the disciples are stealing a few ears of corn, rather as some boys used to go scrumping for apples when I was a lad? Well if they had been gathering whole armfuls of corn that might have been the case, but picking just a few ears of corn was allowed by the law God had given [Dt 23:25]. It was perfectly lawful. The problem was that the extra man-made rules said this was work, so the Pharisees thought it was wrong.

[3] Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? [4] He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Jesus answers the Pharisees by reminding them of a story from 1 Sam 21. It concerns David, whom the Jewish people revered as the greatest king in the history of Israel, though at this point he had not yet become king. In fact he and his men were on the run from King Saul, who mistakenly believed David to be a rebel who was plotting against him. In need of food, David went to the priest and asked for some bread. But the only bread to hand was that which had been set apart for God, in accordance with his law, and which only the priests were allowed to eat. So what David and his men did really seems to have been against God's law, but they were not punished or even told off for it. Now it may be that they were not just hungry but literally starving, in which case the priest had to decide which was worse – to give them the holy bread or to let them die. It may also be that he asked God what he should do, because there is something in the next chapter which would support that. We do not know for sure. But Jesus knows that he is the descendant of David who would become an even greater king, the Messiah or Christ, whose kingdom will never end. The Pharisees would hardly dare to criticise great King David so what right have they to criticise King Jesus, who has done nothing wrong? And to drive home the point, Jesus goes on to make his most shocking claim in verse 5.

[5] Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus often refers to himself as "the Son of Man", recalling Daniel's vision of one who "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." [Dan 7:14] This is a man

who shares God's very nature and glory, which is why Jesus says that he is also Lord of the Sabbath. Only one who is both God and man can truly say that. And because it is true, Jesus is the one man who can say just what God intends the Sabbath to be. Sadly, what Jesus said didn't settle the matter as far as his critics were concerned.

[6] On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. [7] The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath.

The synagogue was the place Jewish people went to on the Sabbath to offer their praise and prayers to God and to listen to his word to them from the Bible, just as we have come here to church this morning. On this occasion, some Pharisees and teachers of the law were not just there to do that. They wanted to nail Jesus, to catch him breaking their rules, and as far as they were concerned healing someone on the Sabbath was doing work.

[8] But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there.

As always, Jesus knew just what was going on in his critics' minds. He also looked with compassion on a disabled man who would have found life very hard. Just think for a moment how you would manage to do all kinds of things if your right hand (or the left one if you are left-handed) was twisted and useless. What's more, Jesus knows that when God rested after finishing his work of creation it didn't mean that he stopped caring for what he had made or that he stopped doing good [see Jn 5:17]. So he throws down a challenge to those who would accuse him.

[9] Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

That question is two-edged and as sharp as a sword. If we neglect to do good to someone when we have the opportunity to do so, we have actually sided with evil. Even more so when it's a matter of life and death. But the question probes deeper. Jesus has come to do good and to save lives – both now and for eternity. Why have his accusers come? They secretly want to destroy him, as will soon become clear. Their intentions are evil. Yet if they would only take his words to heart he would save them too.

[10] He looked round at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law had been watching Jesus closely. He now returns their gaze, perhaps to see whether any of them has got the message. Then he tells the man to do the very thing he has not been able to do until now, to stretch out his hand. To those who put their trust in him, Jesus command brings the ability to do it. The man stretches out his hand and it is completely healed.

[11] But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Instead of becoming wise by taking Jesus' words to heart and repenting of their evil thoughts, his opponents are maddened by what he has said and done. Instead of learning from Jesus and recognising him as the Messiah, God's chosen king, they plot to destroy him, as the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark make clear.

Conclusion

Still today people are divided in their response to Jesus. If Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, as he claims, then he is Lord of everything and everyone, since he is the man who is also God. If we would know the fulness of God's blessing, both now and into eternity, we must put our trust in him and learn to walk in obedience to him. To reject Jesus is to cut ourselves off from that blessing. The writer to the Hebrews tells us of a Sabbath rest for the people of God, which I take to mean what awaits those of us who put our trust in Jesus when all our work in this life is ended. Then the real holiday will begin, which never comes to an end.