

## BREAD, LAW AND SPIRIT

Deuteronomy 5. 12-15

2 Corinthians 4. 5-12

Mark 2. 23-3. 6

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Recently, I came across the following true story which was told at the beginning of a book. The story goes like this:

‘During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night, the bread reminded them, “Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow”.’

Dennis, Matthew, and Sheila Linn tell this story at the beginning of their book, called *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. The book is actually an introduction to the Ignatian concept of spiritual exercises, and it seeks to explain how we can discern spirits of ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’ in our lives in a fairly simple way. Each day, we are encouraged to ask ourselves, ‘Which moment am I most grateful for today?’ and, ‘Which moment am I least grateful for today?’ If those initial questions are not enough, the Linns suggest other questions that get at the same concept, such as, ‘When did I give and receive the most love today?’ and ‘When did I give and receive the least love today?’ or, ‘When did I feel most alive today?’ and ‘When did I most feel life draining out of me?’

The idea is that, over time, patterns emerge to help a person discern how God is calling him or her in life. In essence, when one follows this spiritual discipline, that person is sleeping with bread, or truly holding on to what gives him or her life.

Eating bread to sustain life is seen as a teachable moment in our Gospel story today. When the Pharisees criticise our Lord and his disciples for gleaning from the fields on the Sabbath, Jesus reminds them that when David, called by God and anointed by Samuel, was a fugitive being hunted by Saul, he stopped in the 'house of God' for safety and food. The high priest Abiathar gave David the consecrated bread that was reserved for priests, in order to sustain the lives of David and his companions.

Christ highlights this story in conjunction with the reminder that 'the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath'. The benefits of God benefit everyone, for God created the Sabbath, and to get mired in the rigidity of human law limits the scope of any benefits it may have held. The reason for the Sabbath was (and is) to promote life; and to praise God as our creator and liberator. The Pharisees knew this, but were focussed on the letter of the law and not the spirit in which our Lord applied it. Jesus is directly stating that he is the Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath, which affirms his authority and puts him in conflict with the Pharisees. Christ is doing God's will, while the Pharisees are focussed on gathering evidence against him.

Our Lord takes this life-giving stance even further in the synagogue when he cures the man with the withered hand, restoring him to wholeness and to his community, while at the same time knowing that the Pharisees were watching and hoping to gather more evidence against him. Human nature has not changed much in the intervening centuries. How often do we go to a service at church with a preconceived idea of what we should see, get or feel from it? We mount our own evidence against who is there and what they are doing. As with many things, we see or get or feel

exactly what we put into an experience, and that often means that we leave, like the Pharisees in this story, self-satisfied with the knowledge we were expecting, instead of being open to God's vision. Again, we find Jesus leading us by example. He follows God's will and speaks God's truth in the face of those who want to maintain the status quo.

These stories of Christ bringing life and truth on the Sabbath are instructive to us today. Here is a question to ponder: how is the Sabbath life-giving for us? Do we keep the Sabbath with the same spirit as our Lord in these stories? Think about it this way: we see Jesus, the Son of God, healing and giving life, while the Pharisees and Herodians seek human vengeance to destroy life. Not just to slander Christ or to do something to complicate his life, but to outright *destroy him*. This choice of powerful language, which appears in the last line of our appointed gospel text, explicitly implies annihilation of another person.

To come back to the discernment of the spirits of consolation and desolation that I referred to at the beginning of this homily, we can now perhaps ask ourselves these questions: 'How are we paying attention to the life-giving Spirit of God in our own lives, and how can we support others in doing the same?' and 'When we find the spirit of desolation hovering within us, how do we return to following our Lord?' Reflecting on those places and circumstances of life-giving energy (where we light up, and the world lights up with us) can refocus our eyes on the new thing that God is doing in our lives.

When we reflect upon those events that have been life-giving, we may be led to see that we were sometimes helped by others, who held the light of Jesus for us, when we did not know the path. On other life-giving occasions, we may remember that some people (figuratively) shared their bread with us, so that we could sleep through the night, like the refugee children during the war. If this is the case for us, we can

expect to be called to reach out and do the same for others, to accompany them in life-giving moments, just as Christ did.

Discernment is a never-ending process that is part of our lifelong Christian faith. As we consider what gives us life and what does not in this season of our lives, may God show us new ways to reach the heart of the Sabbath, and to live it truly. The most important thing is that we continue to seek and follow our Lord wherever he leads us; for *he* is at the heart of the Sabbath itself.

Amen.