

Sermon on Luke 13.10-17

What is the worst case of pointless bureaucracy you've come across?

This week I heard of someone who took an old and broken fridge to the recycling centre (not one in this area!):

'Sorry sir, you can't bring that here - it contains dangerous chemicals'.

'Oh' said the man - 'then what should I do with it?'

'You must phone this number and we will come and collect it'.

'OK' said the man. He went back to his car, got out his phone and called the number.

The man he had just been speaking with answered the phone.

'I wish to dispose of a fridge' said the man.

'OK' said the recycling man, 'We will come and collect it. Where are you?'

'Sitting outside the recycling centre' said the man

Sometimes it's easy to keep the rules, but to forget exactly what they're there for.

That's precisely what seemed to be happening with the leaders of the synagogue in our Gospel reading today: *"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day"*.

Jesus is praying in the synagogue, and he notices a woman bent over by illness for 18 long years, unable to stand up straight.

I love the fact that the woman didn't even have to ask for healing. She was in the temple, and so was Jesus and he noticed her and called her over - and healed her. Just like that. It would have been so easy to overlook her, as she stooped so low. But Jesus really sees her. He gives her dignity and a new name - Daughter of Abraham. She's one of the family now.

Now, technically, the synagogue leaders are absolutely right. According to the law of Moses you shouldn't do any 'work' on a sabbath day. It says so in Deuteronomy 5.12-14 *"Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work"*.

(Now we could have along debate about whether and how healing a woman constitutes 'work' or not but in their eyes it obviously does - and Jesus has violated the law).

But I mean they're right in a sense aren't they? It IS important to keep the Sabbath.

As human beings God knows what is best for us. He ordered a sabbath for good reason. He knows we need rest, and a break from constant work. Whenever that happens for you - there is a need for a rhythm of life that involves both activity and rest.

The Sabbath reminds us that constant productive activity is not good for the soul and that as God rested on the seventh day, and so also should we.

But crucially - *and what the synagogue leaders seem to overlook completely* - is that observing the sabbath is not something to be done for its own sake.

You and I might be old enough to remember very strict rules around 'keeping Sunday special'.

I remember the outrage in my church when Sunday opening of shops was first allowed, and I still feel guilty if I go and buy a pint of milk on a Sunday.

You even hear stories of swings being padlocked on a Sunday in some communities to stop any ounce of possibility for having a good time.

I guess the *intentions* were good. The idea was that you should spend time with family or going to church. Was it Victoria Wood who said: *"Going to church was what people did on a Sunday before garden centres were invented"*?

Sabbath is important. We do need to find ways of resting in our busy 24-7 culture.

But simply keeping the rules for the sake of it is not the point.

What the synagogue leaders seem to be forgetting is the *reason* that God gave the sabbath in the first place. Back to Deuteronomy: "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy ... and so on .. and then verse 15 gives the reason - *"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day"* (Deut. 5:15)

The sabbath was given so that God's people might rest - yes - but also and more importantly so that God's people might take time to remember who they are - God's people - and to recall all that he had done for them - bringing them out of slavery in the land of Egypt, releasing them from oppression, freeing them from all that had bent them low and kept them bound and subservient.

And that - *rather ironically* - is exactly what Jesus has just done for the poor woman, enslaved and oppressed by her condition for 18 years, bent over and unable to stand up straight. "With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" he had healed her, and now she was free.

The irony - says Jesus - is that the leaders of the synagogue had probably treated their animals better that day than they would have treated her. He points out the inconsistencies in their own argument and practices. Even their livestock had been

released from their bonds and led to water on this sabbath day, so why should this woman not be untied from the oppression of illness and led to the water of life itself?

Jesus healed the woman on the sabbath because he had come to set people free, and to release the oppressed, and he hated to see anyone bowed down, by injustice, by illness, by oppression, by a needless observance of the rules.

That doesn't mean that we do away with all our rules and regulations - after all what would it be like if I suddenly decided that driving on the left was far too restrictive and I wished to drive on the right for once?

But the rules are given for a reason. God's law is given for human flourishing, but when we overlook the purpose and the spirit of the rules, when we impose them without remembering their motivation, we could be in danger of the kind of legalism Jesus so clearly overturns. Rules which often have their basis in good things - like sabbath rest - can be so easily taken and untied from their original good intentions and used to bind and oppress people instead.

This challenges me this morning to think about when I might be in danger of behaving like the synagogue leaders.

Are there times when I sometimes hide behind 'rules' which keep us and others from being set free by Jesus? Are there ways in which our 'rules' --- both spoken and unspoken --- in the Church and in society - help simply keep the status quo?

Indeed, are there ways in which our 'rules' keep the privileged, privileged and don't allow a way in for those who are not so fortunate?

We need rules and order - most especially the order of the Word of God given for our flourishing - but we need to remember the source and origin and purpose of those rules - God himself - and remember that their primary focus is to lead us into deeper relationship with Him.

At the heart of the Christian faith is not a set of rules and regulations - pointless bureaucracy - but a relationship with one who really sees us, and longs to lift us up from whatever bows us down, so that we too can become one of the family, and join the crowds praising God and rejoicing at all the wonderful things he has been doing.