



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

29th October 2023, 22nd Sunday after Pentecost,

Hallowed be Your Name by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

21 David came to Nob to the priest Ahimelech. Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, "Why are you alone and no one with you?" 2 David said to the priest Ahimelech, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'No one must know anything of the matter about which I send you and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. 3 Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread or whatever is here." ... 6 So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away. 1 Samuel 21:1-6

12 At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." 3 He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 How he entered the house of God, and they ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests? 5 Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? 6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." Matthew 12:1-8

I want to begin with a question. What do you think of as “holy”? What is “holy” for you? Most of us would be associate the word “holy” with God. And by extension, we associate holiness with places that have been set aside for the service of God. For example, churches, temples, or other holy sites. We might also associate holiness with particular rituals or things. For example, the Communion meal. Or a pilgrimage. Or a relic from a saint.

These holy places or rituals or things are dedicated to the honouring of God’s name and are often experienced as “thin places”. Places where heaven and earth kiss, the veil is lifted, and God is experienced in a particularly near or intimate way.

You may have places or rituals that are particularly holy for you. And if you do, you would be joining not only with Jews and Christians, but people of just about every faith and even people of no faith who may not even believe in God, but still have an appreciation of the holy and the sacred. By which I mean they associate a place or thing with incalculable and *divine* worth or value.

The Bible talks a lot about holiness. Within second-temple Judaism, the Temple in Jerusalem is one such holy place. In fact, it’s *the* most holy place. And at the centre of the Temple was the Holy of holies, the very dwelling place of God, which was veiled by a curtain.

And just at the entrance to the Holy of holies was a table with a loaf of bread, called the bread of the presence. It was a symbol of God’s living presence in the midst of the people. And because this bread was so holy, only the priestly class was allowed to prepare the bread and to enter the sanctuary and to replace it with hot, freshly baked bread every day.

So that might give you a sense of how Jewish audiences would have heard our Old Testament reading today. We hear about David, who is on the run for his life, in desperate need. And one of his immediate needs is food. Food for him and his companions as they make their escape from the murderous King Saul. David finds himself at a holy place – called *Nob*. The only food available to him at such short notice is “the Bread of the Presence” guarded by the priests. Deeply holy. Deeply sacred.

It raises a conundrum for the priest who greets him at the sanctuary. On the one hand, here is a man in desperate need. David, no less, who was the beloved hero of Israel. On the other hand, to allow David to take the bread would be an awful desecration of this most holy place. What would you do?

Well, we already know the priest did. He gave David the bread. I suspect most of us would do the same. When someone is in need, certain rules and rituals can be broken. Should be broken.

Something similar happens in our gospel reading today. Jesus’ disciples are picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. They’re doing work on the holy day of rest. The Pharisees point out that this is a desecration of the Sabbath. The holiness of the day is preserved by honouring it as a day of rest, prayer and worship to God. No work.

And while the Pharisees aren’t wrong, Jesus rebukes them by reminding them about the story of David. The rituals and laws, Jesus suggests, may be there for a reason. But in the

face of human need, they can and should be broken. To do so is to show mercy and love towards our human siblings. And God, we're told, "desires mercy and not ritual sacrifice."

There's a saying: "Someone can't see the wood for the trees." It suggests that, when we get fixated on the detail, we lose track of the bigger picture. I wonder if it's applicable in this situation.

"Something *greater* than the temple is here," Jesus says. He's saying I think that the Pharisees were so fixated on the *letter* of the law that they had ceased to understand the *spirit* of the law. They can't see the wood for the trees.

If you were here last week, you'll remember Bruce Anderson was assisting with worship and he asked the question why we practice certain rituals. Why do we light the Christ candle for instance? Why do we carry the Bible in? Why do we pray for others and always follow it with the Lord's Prayer?

They're good questions. If I can link his questions to our passage today, I think he was asking, *what's the spirit behind the law? What's the intention behind these rituals?* Because if it's just ritual for ritual's sake, it kind of misses the point.

Bruce's concern is actually a very Presbyterian concern. Our Presbyterian forebears in Scotland were hyper-allergic to ritualism, which they saw as idolatrous. You hear of the awful and destructive iconoclasm of the Reformation. Churches were stripped of art. Hymns were sung unaccompanied. Worship was simplified down to bare basics. Even the Lord's Prayer was viewed with suspicion as an idolatrous ritual.

Today, we look back on those times as severe. And those times have had a rather long and tragic legacy. For instance, the Presbyterian tradition has long been impoverished in the arts. The Catholics, by contrast, never such had such an issue. There's a reason why the likes of Colin McCahon, James K Baxter, and Joy Cowley found their spiritual home in the Catholic Church rather than the Presbyterian. We've cut off our nose to spite our face.

That being case, it's worth understanding why our Presbyterian forebears had the views that they did. They were reacting to a deeply embedded *superstitious* spirituality which was prevalent in medieval Europe. This superstitious religion ascribed *magical* qualities to holy places, rituals and things – to the point that these holy places and things were worshipped rather than God.

For instance, it was commonplace for folk to pocket their communion bread so that they could take it home and sprinkle it on their garden to help their plants grow.

For our rather humourless Presbyterian forebears that missed the point entirely. The bread wasn't *itself* holy or infused with magical qualities. Rather the ritual of Communion served *to point to* – *to open our eyes to* – the God who dwells in us, with us, beneath us, above us. The bread is symbol and sign of a deeper, spiritual truth.

It's that that Jesus was trying to communicate to the Pharisees in our Gospel reading today. Yes, the Sabbath rules are there for a reason. Yes, the temple rituals have a place. Yes, the religious law is intended to help us in our life with God. But they are not themselves holy. And following them doesn't automatically make us holy. Rather they serve to open our eyes to the holy and loving God among us. And if they serve as a barrier to experiencing God and participating in God's love, then they shouldn't be followed.

How does Jesus put it? *There is something greater than the temple here.*

In other words, religious ritual, doctrine, tradition should never be followed blindly in a legalistic and inflexible way. That's because the religious ritual and doctrine is not good in and of itself. It is a tool, a vessel, which serves a *purpose*. And that purpose is to open our eyes to the God of love present among us, and to help us share in God's love – through love and mercy to one another, through love and mercy towards ourselves, through love and mercy towards our earth.

Really, Jesus says, the whole law can be summarised in such a way. Love God, love neighbour. That's what holiness looks like.

You might notice that, given this is a series on prayer, I've said very little about prayer so far. I've said quite a lot about ritual, but not much about prayer specifically.

But really what I've said so far is applicable to prayer. I want to suggest that when we pray, we are engaging in a spiritual practice of opening ourselves up to the holy God; we are opening ourselves up to this "something greater" in us, around us, beneath us, above us.

I've been reading a theologian called David Bentley Hart. And he would suggest that today we've become largely blind to the presence of God, to the presence of the divine, in us and around us creating and sustaining all things. We've taught ourselves to see the world in a very mechanical way. And we have desensitised ourselves to the wonder that is all around us at any given moment. We've become blind to the sacred in the ordinary and the mundane.

Prayer is the tonic. When we pray *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name (may your name be holy)* we are opening our eyes to the holy God of love who is in us and with us by the Spirit making all things sacred, blessing all things with incalculable worth.

So may our eyes opened today and everyday that we may share in the mercy and love of God. Amen.