

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Synod of Bishops: First Homily
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Luke 6:6-11

⁶On another sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (NRSV)

Dear Brothers in Christ, today we start with Luke 6:6-12 – and yes, the Pharisees are in the dock; and yes, they are found guilty!

Jesus has healed on the Sabbath – in contravention of their teaching, based on 'the plain meaning of scripture', that no work should be done on the Sabbath. For the healing work of a doctor was nonetheless work.

It is like the story of the good Samaritan, later in St Luke's gospel. The robbers leave the beaten-up traveller by the side of the road, 'half-dead'. The priest and the Levite pass by. Why so? Because they are callous? No, because they are obeying the clear teaching of scripture.

In Leviticus 21, the Lord tells Moses to say to the priests: 'No one of you shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin.

Touching a corpse, or even entering the house of a person who had died, rendered one unclean, defiled. The High Priest was forbidden to make himself unclean even for his parents: 'He shall not go where there is a dead body.'

So the priest and Levite were obeying scripture in avoiding the battered body that, if not a corpse already, looked as if he would become one at any moment.

What are we to do? Are we to handle Old and New Testament alike, as Jesus handled the Old Testament in these accounts?

Yet a fortnight ago, in Matthew's Gospel (23:23) I was also struck by this verse – again directed against 'guess who':

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.'

Yes: 'It is these you ought to have practiced – *without neglecting the others.*'

We must find what is the Christ-like way to 'do both' in all circumstances.

And of course, Jesus also tells us that he has come to fulfil the law, not do away with it, and no jot or tittle, 'not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matt 5:18).

It all makes hermeneutics, scriptural interpretation, a challenging business.

So, what shall we conclude from this?

Please do not think that what I have been saying is merely a coded call to throw out all we have ever taught on human sexuality, as we come to debate pastoral guidelines for the care of those in parishes who have taken advantage of the South African government's legislation for civil unions!

Though I must say, I was more than a little disconcerted at the 'coincidence' that we should find ourselves faced with precisely such a passage on the very day we tackle this difficult question!

Rather, let us take this as a warning that, on this, as on other matters that come before us this week, we must be careful to check: do we find it easier to stand with the scribes and Pharisees on tough questions, and are we right to do so?

How can we not neglect the law, and yet ensure we are making room for the expression of 'the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith'?

What of the lesbian couple who faithfully brings their children to church each week – what if they seek baptism for them? Where is law? Where is mercy?

This is a real issue for one cleric I know. I guess he is just the tip of the ice-berg.

These are not easy questions – but let us pray for the grace of God to lead us in the life-giving way of truth, who is Jesus Christ.

And let us pray to find his healing, for our lives, and the lives of those we are called to shepherd and serve – as the man with the withered hand found, on that Sabbath so long ago.

Amen.