**MARK BLOG WEEK FOUR**

**16. MARK 2 v 15-17:** It can be observed that Matthew is wealthy enough to own a large house which can accommodate many people seated for a meal. I find it interesting that the Jewish religious leaders either had free access into peoples' homes or they had plenty of spies informing them of issues.

Matthew had yielded himself to Jesus and naturally he wanted his friends to know Him too, so what better than a meal! His friends were, inevitably, like him, as no respectable person would meet with tax collectors. In one sense, these were outcasts of society, though wealthy. It is important to recognise that those who faithfully followed Jewish Law did not want to spend time with such people and had no compunction to feel they should: this is one of the many ways Jesus transformed the moral, spiritual and ethical landscape when He ministered. Jesus defied the orthodox conventions of His day.

It is also vital to recognise that 'sinners' did not necessarily indicate moral turpitude. It could also mean in Jesus' day someone who did not observe the scribal Law. In a Jew's eyes, the person who committed adultery and the person who ate pork or didn't wash his hands the correct number of times were both sinners! Obedience was often impossible for those who had to work to live, for scribal law brought so many infinitesimal matters to the table.

When I lead times of Communion around the Lord's table, I often declare everyone present to be a sinner and it is only when we acknowledge ourselves to be fallen creatures that God can come in and transform us. Those who looked down in judgement on what Jesus did were not in the right place spiritually to accept their need of His saving grace. Their attitude was one of contempt and fear for sinners: ideally, they would have them vanish from the earth. Does your heart go out to those who are in darkness? Are you full of compassion for those who have no leader they can look up to and whose lives are driven by fear and anxiety?

**17. MARK 2 v 18-20:** Fasting was a regular practice for strict Jews, although there was only one day of the year where every Jew had to fast and that was on the Day of Atonement, the day when the whole nation confessed their sin and was forgiven. The stricter Jews would generally fast on two days every week-Mondays and Thursdays-from 6 am to 6 pm. Although generally fasting can be seen as a good thing, the Pharisees used it as a means of self-aggrandisement, calling all those who were bystanders to their goodness because they would whiten their faces and wear different clothes on their fast days! They also felt that it would bring them to the notice of God.

So, Jesus is approached and questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist as to why His disciples didn't fast. I think we can understand it to be a gentle, but critical approach, but it can be noted that those who didn't or couldn't fast (because they had jobs full of hard labour) stood out as being 'less religious'. The answer of Jesus involved Him talking about Jewish weddings. When a couple got married, they remained at home and, for a week or so, they had open house where there was continual feasting. I think we can gather from John's description of the wedding in Cana that these were times of great joy and involved the whole community: they were a great escape from what was generally a hard life with an early death. The disciples were like the closest friends of the Bridegroom and so Rabbinic ruling stated that they were relieved of all religious observances during this time of celebration. This is a reminder to us that the life that is lived in Christ cannot be lived other than in joy.

 However, Jesus gives the listeners early notice that one day there would be separation and sadness. Jesus knew that the cross lay ahead, yet He wouldn't be deflected from the road He was on.

**18. MARK 2 v 21, 22:** One of the dangers of studying only a couple of verses as we are today is that they can so easily be taken out of context. These are the words of Jesus commenting about the questions of John the Baptist's disciples and Mark leads us straight from this to the episode where the Pharisees criticise the disciples for breaking one of the oral laws concerning the sabbath- verses 23-28, which we will look at tomorrow.

Jesus knew well that He was coming with a message which was shockingly new and that it would be difficult for human minds to accept and embrace the new truths He was bringing. Remember that every Jew would have known the Old Testament well and sought to observe it or at least the feast and fast days and the general worship and obedience to YHWH (Jehovah). Jesus uses two illustrations,  fabulous everyday examples, to demonstrate how preconceptions had to change. He speaks here about the danger of sewing a new patch on an old garment: as the new patch has never experienced the shrinkage which an old garment would have, the new patch would shrink in the first rain and tear away from the old garment. The day of patching for that garment was over and a completely new garment was needed- ''You must be born again!'' Jesus declared to the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Are we attempting to patch over in our own life or in the life of our church fellowship when what is needed is a complete abandonment of the past and the acceptance of something completely new?

The second illustration Jesus uses is that of wine, which was kept in wine skins in those days. When the skin was new, it would have a degree of elasticity, but when they became old they became hard and unyielding. When new wine is poured into skins it is still fermenting and these gases cause pressure. If it is a new skin, it will expand, but if old it could explode, meaning the loss of the wine. As Christians, we must remain young in our thinking. I've known very elderly people who are still childlike in their ready acceptance of the new and I've known people younger than myself intolerant and bigoted, set in their ways. A wise man once said: ''When you reach a conclusion you're dead!'' A great Biblical example of a person who continued to grow throughout their life was Jacob, who we are told that, when extremely elderly and just before his death 'bowed in worship over the top of his staff' (Hebrews 11 v 21). He was continuing to walk with God!

**19. MARK 2 v 23-28:** I heard a question on the radio some time ago which asked when the Sunday trading law had come in, allowing large shops to open on Sundays and it reminded me that there was a time in my memory when no shops apart from little corner shops could open and Sundays were generally very quiet, even in London where I grew up. The Sabbath day observance was, for a long time, a major commitment for the whole of British society and that demonstrated how seriously the Sabbath day would have been treated in a wholly religious society such as Israel. On the seventh day God rested, so it was designed as part of the foundation of how the world worked. I think even today fields are left fallow once every seven years and it is believed that humans are at their most productive when having one day in seven off.

 On an ordinary day of the week, the disciples were doing what was freely permitted, but the Sabbath was hedged around with thousands of petty rules and regulations and one of the many things the Pharisees prided themselves on was their knowledge of these myriad commitments. By plucking the ears of corn as they walked and eating them, the disciples were considered law-breakers and therefore could face the death penalty!

  It appears that the Pharisees expected Jesus to stop the actions of the disciples, but instead He responded by quoting from the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 21 v 1-6 is the story of David, fleeing for his life, arriving at Nob and demanding food for himself and his band. All there was where the twelve loaves which had been offered to God and where therefore the property of priests and Levites. David was starving and on his last legs, so took and ate the bread with his men and so Jesus showed through the retelling of this tale that human need takes precedence over divine Law. Jesus declared that, thus, human beings were created not to be the victims of Sabbath rules, but the Sabbath should have made their lives better, enabling them to have a rest, preventing any employer from exploiting them any further than they already were!

In this little vignette we are reminded that religion does not consist of rules and regulations. True Christianity stems from hearts that have been transformed by the love and mercy of God.

We are also reminded that the first claim on anyone is the claim of human need. I was reminded yesterday of the Good Samaritan and those who passed by the poor victim did so because of fear of breaking religious rules. **If ever the performance of our religion prevents us helping someone in need, our religion is not religion at all.** The Sabbath was never so sacred as when it was used to help those who needed help. The decisive factor in all events is love, not Law.

**20. MARK 3 v 1-6:** It all sounds like a set-up and Jesus can do nothing else but heal the man with the paralysed hand. It is essential for us to recognise that, with Jesus, compassion was at the centre of His heart and His actions.

Here we see the deep cynicism of the Jewish religious leaders. That, any supposedly pious group of people can put all their concentration on bringing about a situation which will see a man, a good man, arrested and killed, demonstrates what a dark path the cynical can take to the point where nothing is pure, nothing is attractive, nothing is good-the opposite of what Paul encouraged the Philippian church to set their minds on- Philippians 4 v 8!

This was a crucial incident in the life of Jesus. He bravely returned to the synagogue, He continued to heal knowing what it would bring upon Him and so it brought to a head the great gulf between what Jesus proclaimed- the religion springing from the heart with what the Pharisees declared- the external rituals of the Law. One's heart could be as black as black, but as long as the outside, external demonstrated obedience to God, all was fine!

To Jesus, the most important thing was not the correct performance of a ritual, but the spontaneous answer of the cry of human need.