

**Homily for March 5, 2000
Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle B**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Deuteronomy 5:12-15
2 Corinthians 4:6-11
Mark 2:23-3:6**

We dare to stand in solidarity with those in need.

Jesus' famous dictum: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around," puts me in mind of an autistic child who said: "Machines are better than people because they stop sometimes."

But the use of the Sabbath, our choice of how to spend it, how to give time to God and to ourselves...this is not the main subject of this gospel passage of Mark chapter 2. It's about law...our slavery to it and our use of it and for what purpose. St. Mark uses the term "hardness of heart" to describe the closed-mindedness of onlookers at one of Jesus' miracles of healing. The term "hardness of heart" in both old and new testaments is a Semitic figure for resisting the truth, for seeing what one only wishes to see. Anyone who has forgotten the purpose of a good law, like that requiring Sunday observance - or Sunday mass, or regular bible reading, for that matter - has succumbed to a deadening legalism. Like a Greek chorus, Jewish opponents of the early Christian Jews are portrayed decades later as standing off to the side observing Jesus' actions and shouting out their condemnations. The Sabbath for them is no longer a time to remember God's rest when the work of creation was done, but a time to accuse

others. To pick grain on the Sabbath was taken to mean to reap, to work, and so to break the Law. They have lost their memory of God the Liberator and remember only their interpretation of the oral law their forbearers had devised. They cannot see the brother and sister in need of healing. To whom can they be likened in our day? People who call all religious persons hypocrites, perhaps. ...But not quite. Closer to the mentality of St. Mark's day are the people of our time who are so convinced that their interpretation of being Christian is the right one that they deny the word to all others - and sometimes do ugly things to others in the name of being "Christian." We can fall into the trap of believing that our community, our laws, our traditions, our structures - even our sacraments - are more important than the Incarnation itself. The signs of our redemption can loom larger than the actual victory Christ has won for us. We can forget the purpose of our religious observances, lose our sense of our priorities, and find solace in a rigid legalism rather than in an all-gracious God. If that should happen, we would then find it easy to sit in judgment on those we deem less observant believers or to be less ethically oriented persons than ourselves. We have at that point begun to shrivel up, to harden our hearts. We then deserve the famous satiric

verses of Jonathan Swift, the creator of *Gulliver's Travels* and himself a clergyman, who quipped: "We are God's chosen few/all others will be damned/there is no place in heaven for you/we can't have heaven crammed."

And Lent starts this coming Wednesday...what should be an occasion of inviting God's invasion through acts of prayer, fasting and works of kindness can also be a source of self-righteousness, without saying in effect, "Oh, I can make myself perfect by my own efforts." No we can't...nor should we ever. Holiness, grace is ever a gift we can only receive, never earn... like Holy Communion.

On the various Sundays of Lent we shall be welcoming and praying with our catechumens and candidates for full communion at most, if not all, of the masses on the weekend.

Those who are journeying to the table for the first time are God's gift to us, for they let us see what faith costs and means and what a treasure it is. Jesus stands in solidarity with the nobodies and the oppressed of the Earth...we can choose to stand with him by the way we look upon our religious observances and be open and accepting. Perhaps the Lord would really like us to reflect the truth of another writer, Edwin Markham: "He drew a circle that shut me out/rebel, heretic, thing to flout/but love and I had the wit to win/we drew a circle that took him in."

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