

# The Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 5:12-15
<i>Response</i>	Sing joyfully to God our strength.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 81:3-4, 5-6, 7-8A, 10-11AB
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 4:6-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your Word O Lord is Truth Sanctify us in the truth.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:23-3:6

The 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the Church's journey through the Gospel of Mark and brings us to some of the early conflicts in that Gospel between Jesus and the Pharisees and other opponents of his over the way he handles the question of the Sabbath, the day of rest in Jewish law, in the Mosaic Law, and in the Old Testament. Let's turn to Mark 2:23-3:6 and look at these two episodes in which Jesus comes into conflict over the Sabbath. The passage begins in verse 23 with these words:

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck ears of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abi'athar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out,

and immediately held counsel with the Hero'di-ans against him, how to destroy him.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so you have these two episodes in which Jesus comes into conflict with his Jewish contemporaries over the Sabbath. So in order to understand this passage, it is really important to go back and recall that the Sabbath, *Shabbat* in Hebrew, the Sabbath commandment is one of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. So this is no light matter. If you go back to the book of Exodus 20:8 and following, you'll see the commandment to:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

And although we tend to associate the Sabbath with Sunday in the New Testament or in the New Covenant and with Sunday worship, like, say, the weekly obligation to attend Mass and to attend the Liturgy of the Eucharist, it's actually important to remember that in the Old Testament itself, there isn't any positive prescription for worship in the Sabbath commandment. The Sabbath commandment is focused entirely on keeping the day holy through rest and through cessation of labor. So Exodus 20 says:

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

So notice, no reference there to, you know, going to the synagogue, or going to the Temple, or offering sacrifice. No, the command on Sabbath is about rest. It's about cessation from work. So the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians in this part is going to be over the apparent activity, labor in which he and his disciples engage on that day. Whether it's plucking heads of grain, which would be a form of harvesting, right, like you're going out in the field, you're taking the fruits of the land, or healing, as he does with the man with the withered hand, which would be an action on his part. You can imagine a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

physician, for example, healing someone on the Sabbath would be a kind of act of...it's labor, it's work, it's activity. Okay, so that's really what the whole conflict revolves around. And in response to those those two issues, Jesus makes some profound Christological points, some Christological revelations about who he is. Not just who he is, but who his disciples are as well. So let's look at them for just a minute and try to put this in context.

In the first episode, the disciples are going through the field and they're plucking heads of grain. And the Pharisees say, "Look, they're doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." And again, so what the Pharisees are interpreting the action of the disciples as engaging in is a kind of minimal, albeit real, act of harvesting. You know, they're gleaning from the fields. And so in response to that, Jesus raises the question, "well, haven't you read what David did in the Old Testament?" And so here he's alluding to this famous story in 1 Samuel 21, where it says "David was in need, he was hungry, along with the men who were with him, and he entered the House of God when Abiathar was High priest and ate the bread of the presence. So, in order to understand this episode, you have to go back to 1 Samuel 21, which is a very interesting passage because it gives us a little window into the sanctuary in the Temple...well it's not the Temple at this point, it's just the Tabernacle in the Old Testament. This is the passage Jesus is alluding to, so let's keep the context in mind so we can understand it. It says in 1 Samuel 21:1 and following:

then came David to Nob to Ahim'elech the priest; and Ahim'elech came to meet David trembling, and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?" And David said to Ahim'elech the priest, "The king...

Meaning King Saul.

...has charged me with a matter, and said to me, 'Let no one 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. Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here."

David is saying he's on an expedition, he has these young men with him, and he asks Abimelech the priest to give him some food because they're hungry. And then the priest answered:

And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread at hand, but

there is holy bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.”

Pause. That's a very strange thing to say, right? If David comes and asks for bread, and the priest's response is, "Have the young men kept themselves from women?" What's the correlation there? Well, the holy bread that the priest is referring to here is the bread of the presence in the Tabernacle, that was kept in the Tabernacle and maintained by the priests, the sons of Aaron. So, a lot of people aren't aware of this fact, but in the Old Testament, although married men could function as priests, whenever they served in the Tabernacle or served in the Temple as priests, they were to abstain from ordinary relations with their wives, right? And to be in a state of purity in order to enter into the Temple. And of the things that the priests did in the Temple was bake and offer the bread of the presence, this holy bread that I've talked about in other videos. You can look in Exodus 25 if you want to find out more about the bread of the presence. It was a visible sign of God's presence with his people, a kind of earthly sacrament, we might even say, of the presence of God with His people at Mount Sinai, when he came down upon the mountain in Exodus 24. So here, David is asking for the bread of the presence, and the priest is going to give it to him as long as the young men are, as he puts it, “holy”, as long as they have set their bodies apart — holy means to be set apart, right — from ordinary activities and therefore are in a state of ritual purity, so that they can receive the bread, and David says:

And David answered the priest, “Of a truth women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men...

Meaning their bodies

...are holy, even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?” So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there but 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.

And that day, by the way, is on the Sabbath. So the bread of the presence, this is very important, it is the principal unbloody sacrifice that would be offered in the Tabernacle and the Temple on the Sabbath day. That's the activity the priests themselves will engage in on the Sabbath day, is to make an offer the bread of

the presence. So David here sets up a prototype for Jesus and his disciples. So when you go back to the New Testament, what Jesus is doing is implicitly comparing himself to David and his disciples to David's companions, all of whom act as if they are priests, right, by not only working on the Sabbath, but partaking of the bread of the presence on the Sabbath, which it wasn't lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. So basically what Jesus does here is give a passage from Jewish scripture in which David and his men apparently violate the laws regarding the bread of the presence and yet are not condemned for doing so. There's an exceptional concession to their hunger that is made in which the priest allows them to eat of the bread of the presence because they're in this ritual state and because they are hungry.

So with that foundation in mind, Jesus says:

“The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath.”

So now he goes even further. It's one thing to say I and my disciples can pluck heads of grain and eat grain on the Sabbath because David and his men ate the bread of the presence on the Sabbath. It's another thing now to refer to the Son of man, which is a self-reference that Jesus will use over and over in the Gospels, as being Lord of the Sabbath, right. There's a kind of supremacy over the Sabbath. Now this passage can be taken in one of two ways. On the one hand, it can be taken as a reference to Adam, right? If you think about it and you go back to the Old Testament in Genesis 1, Sabbath, the Sabbath rest is made for man. In other words, it's made for Adam and Eve so that they might have rest from their labors each week. Man is not created for the sake of the Sabbath, but the Sabbath is created for the sake of man. So he's relativizing, in a sense, the Sabbath commandment with regard to the needs of a human being. In this case, the hunger of himself and his disciples, or the hunger of David and his companions. That's one way to interpret it.

And that's right, but there's also a deeper level of meaning, a little more Christologically charged, because Son of man cannot just mean a human being like Adam. The Son of man can also be *The Son of Man*, like capital T, capital S, Capital M, Son of Man, a titular or title-like reference to the mysterious figure of The Son of Man, one like a Son of Man who comes on the clouds of Heaven in the Book of Daniel, which will become a later title for the Messiah, this heavenly figure, this heavenly king. And I would say that Jesus is using this in both ways. He's both justifying the activity of himself and his disciples on the

Sabbath day by relativizing the Sabbath and saying Man is not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath is for man. But he's also revealing that as Son of Man, he is Lord of the Sabbath. And that's a Christologically charged passage. If by it he means that he himself, in his own person, has a unique authority over the Sabbath, right, over the law of the Sabbath. Because from that point of view, the only person who could be called lord of the Sabbath is God himself, because he's the lawgiver who establishes the Sabbath, not only in the order of creation in Genesis 1, but also in the Decalogue in Exodus 20. So this is a shocking Christological statement that Jesus is making, although it is still ambiguous enough where people are probably puzzling over, "Wait, what exactly does he mean?" Is he talking about the fact that human beings are more important than the Sabbath law? That the Sabbath law was made for them? Or is he saying that he himself is above the Sabbath and able to dispense from the laws of the Sabbath should he see fit? And the answer to that is kind of both of them, really. It's a both/and situation, as is so often the case with Jesus' teachings.

Real quick, before I forget to; the passage about David and the men in the Old Testament is interesting because basically what it's going to show is that in the Old covenant you will have what we might call temporary celibacy for priests. In other words, there would be a temporary period of abstinence for married men whenever they served in the sanctuary, because they did it on rotations. They would serve for a short period throughout the year, like say two week period of service, and then they go back to their lands and their families if they were a priest. But in the new covenant, one of the reasons you're going to end up with a different discipline, especially in the Roman Church in the West, is that the temporary celibacy, so to speak, practiced by priests in the Old Testament will become a permanent state of celibacy in the New Covenant priesthood. Especially in the West, where daily Mass, daily entry into the sanctuary, daily offering of the sacrifice of the Mass becomes the norm rather than the exception. So there's a logical consistency between the Old New Testaments. I deal with that in a presentation I did called Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Priesthood, so you can maybe look into that if you'd like to dive in a little more deeply. But that is one implication of this passage for sacramental discipline in the Roman Catholic Church that I think is actually interesting. But that's not the point of the pericopes today, the Church is clearly teaching them here with a focus on Sabbath and Jesus's relation to the Sabbath.

So the second episode is the healing of the man with the withered hand, and here Jesus, rather than alluding to a particular scripture from the Old Testament to justify his activity, He just lays out a principle:

“Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”

And in this case, they're silent. They have no response to that because it's obvious that the Sabbath is not meant to do away with acts of goodness and kindness or acts of mercy. but rather to create a time, sacred time, to rest from labor, the kind of labor that fills up the life of a human being, right? And from which humans need to rest, precisely so that all of our activities are not just ordered toward earthly production and earthly work, but toward resting and worshipping God. It's making time sacred by setting apart a time for God alone, and not for earthly pursuits like earthly labor and harvesting. But Jesus says here is it better to do good and to save life, or to do harm and to kill? And so they have no response. And when he sees that, he sees their hardness of heart toward this man who needs to be healed, He's grieved at it and says to the man:

“Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Hero'di-ans against him, how to destroy him

So what we see here is Jesus is perceived by the Pharisees, and in this case by another group called the Herodians, a very mysterious group. We don't know exactly who they are. They're an obscure group. Scholars have different proposals about them. They most likely either refer to Jewish officials who were hired by Herod Antipas and were acting as kind of spies on his behalf to kind of see what's going on with Jesus of Nazareth, or, this is an interesting alternative, they're not officials, but what they are are Jewish supporters of King Herod the Great and the Herodian family. I just recently discovered this, St. Jerome and some of the early Church Father actually thought that the Herodians were Jews who believed that Herod, King Herod the Great, was in fact the Messiah and that his family was the rightful royal family of the promises of the Messianic Kingdom. Now that's an interesting suggestion because recent scholarship on Herod the Great has actually shown that one of the reasons Herod the Great was so invested in expanding the Temple Mount and building the Temple, like when the Jews say to Jesus, you know, it's taken 46 years to build this Temple and you destroy it in three days, destroy it and rebuild it in three days, like in the Gospel of John. The 46 years, that's not a reference to the Second Temple.

The Second Temple was built after the Jews returned from exile in the 5th century BC, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. No, that's a

reference to the Herodian expansion of the Temple that began with Herod the Great, because there was an expectation that when the Messiah would come, he would build a new Temple, and the new Temple of the Messiah would be bigger and more glorious than even the Temple of Solomon was. So, it is at least interesting to speculate that the Herodians may have been Jews who not only were political supporters of King Herod and the Herodian family, but also in a sense, theological supporters of Herod who saw him as a messianic figure, right? And saw his family as a kind of messianic family. And where supporters in that regard.

And if that's true, if that's correct. Again, it's just a suggestion of some of the early Church Fathers, but I find it intriguing because it would actually explain the animosity of the Herodians toward Jesus, because he would not just be viewed as a kind of religious threat, but as a political threat to the political power of the Herodian family. Because, you know, this town is not big enough for the both of us kind of thing, where you can't have two political claimants to Messianic and Davidic royalty in one area. In this case, northern Galilee. So, in any case, it's an interesting suggestion. Whatever the Herodians are, they clearly don't like Jesus, and they don't like him enough to go out with the Pharisees and plot against him as to how to destroy him, right? He's seen as a serious threat. So the Pharisees are responding here to Jesus' apparent violation of the Sabbath laws and apparent implicit claim of authority over the Sabbath. And the Herodians are going to join together with them against a common enemy in Jesus and his disciples, although they won't appear till later in the gospel. We don't ever really see them play the kind of role that the Pharisees and, then later, the Sanhedrin will play. But it's a fascinating window that Mark gives us here in Mark 3.

So okay, that's the basic shape of the Sabbath controversies for today. If we go back to the Old Testament reading for today, it is pretty straightforward. I read to you from Exodus 20 version of the commandment, but the reading for today is from Deuteronomy 5:12-15 on the Sabbath. And one reason I read from Exodus here that I think is helpful for us to keep in mind, is that there are two versions of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. Sometimes we forget this. So God gives the Ten Commandments to Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20, right after they get out of Egypt. And then Moses gives the Ten Commandments again to Israel after they've been in the desert for 40 years in the Book of Deuteronomy, when they're on the plains of Moab about to enter into the Promised Land. So there are two versions of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. So the reading for today is from the second version of



the Ten Commandments, and it says this:

Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work...

Notice that. This is one of the reasons the Pharisees are going to be so strict about their interpretation of this Sabbath. No work whatsoever:

...you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

So notice here, this is interesting. In Exodus, the commandment is rooted in the order of creation. God makes the world in six days and rest on the seventh, therefore you will rest. Here it's rooted in the order of redemption of the Exodus, right? You were a slave and then God sets you free from slavery and made it where you can actually rest now. So therefore you're going to rest on the Sabbath to keep it holy. So the Sabbath acts as a kind of double memorial. It's a memorial of creation, and it's a memorial of the Exodus and the liberation that God wins for his people in the Exodus from Egypt. And that's why the Church here, in the Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 81, takes up a song of joy and praise to God for delivering his people from slavery in Egypt and leading the people home to freedom in the Promised Land. So the Responsorial Psalm acts as a thematic bridge between the Sabbath and the Old Testament, and the freedom Jesus is going to give in the New Testament, both with regard to his disciples freedom to pluck heads of grain and to eat, you know, to serve that human need on the Sabbath. But also in his freedom, to heal this man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day as a manifestation of the goodness that he's going to do, right, and the fact that he's come into the world to save. Not just to save souls, but in this case to restore human bodies that are in sickness and in suffering, as was the man with the withered hand.

Okay, so that's the readings for today. In terms of the living tradition, I want to make two key points. The first one is that Jesus' act of healing on the Sabbath

and his defense of his disciples on the Sabbath was long interpreted as a revelation of His divinity. So for example, in the Old Testament one of the early Church writers, Novatian of Rome, has a book on the Trinity and this is what he says about the pericope for today, the passage:

As he is, according to his humanity, the Son of David, so is he also, as God, the Lord of David. *As he is, according to his humanity, born under the law, so is he as God, the Lord of the Sabbath.*<sup>2</sup>

So here you see Novatian interpreting the Lord of the Sabbath as a Christological expression that doesn't just reveal the fact that human beings are set over the Sabbath and the Sabbath is meant to aid them, but that Jesus himself, as the Son of Man, is revealing that he is divine, that he has divine authority over the Sabbath day. It's a revelation of his divinity.

The second thing that I would highlight here is an interesting text. This is from Theophylact. Theophylact was an Eastern Christian writer in the 11th century, so he's one of the Greek writers in the East, not from the early period, but from the Middle Ages. And he's a fascinating writer because he wrote a number of commentaries on the Gospels. And here he offers a solution to a problem that maybe you noticed when I was reading the text. That if you look in the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Mark says, the passage for today, that David entered the House of God when Abiathar was high priest. Yet when I read 1 Samuel 21, you might have noticed that the priest's name there was Ahimelech, right? So if you go back to 1 Samuel 21, it says the priest Ahimelech came to meet David and gave him the bread.

So this has been an apparent contradiction that's puzzled many authors. How can Mark say that the high priest was Abiathar when 1 Samuel says that the priest was Ahimelech, right? And people have given different solutions to this apparent contradiction between Mark and the Old Testament. In fact, this contradiction was very famous contradiction because in the Second Vatican Council, when there were debates taking place on the council floor over the question of the inspiration and truth of Scripture, one of the bishops, I think he was from Germany, brought up this apparent contradiction as something that would need to be addressed in the discussions of the inerrancy of Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture and its freedom from error. So this is one of the things that wasn't discovered in the modern, people have known about this for a

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<sup>2</sup> Novatian of Rome, *The Trinity* 11; trans. T. C. Oden and C. Hall [3<sup>rd</sup> century].

long time. So Theophylact gives a fascinating solution to this. I'll just read to you his words. This from the 11th century. He wrote this in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark. And by the way, we don't have many commentaries on the Gospel of Mark. Most of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church would either comment on Matthew or John, right? Maybe on Luke, but Mark seems to get left out of the equation because almost all of Mark's Gospel is in Matthew and there's so much more in Matthew that the second Gospel, he's like the middle child in the family, so to speak. So Theophylact's commentary on Mark is interesting because he highlights this particular difficulty and this is what he says:

Some have asked how it is that the evangelist here calls the high priest Abiathar, while in the book of Kings [Greek name for 1 Samuel] he is called Ahimelech. It can be said that perhaps Abiathar had two names and that he was also called Ahimelech.

So one solution is you have two names, like Simon and Peter or Saul and Paul. That's one apparent solution. But he gives a different one also:

Also it can be said that the book of Kings says that the priest at that time was Ahimelech, while the evangelist says that the high priest was Abiathar. *So this is not contradictory, for the priest was Ahimelech, while the high priest was Abiathar.*<sup>3</sup>

Now I found this solution an interesting one because that was actually something I myself had come up with as I was reading through the text and looking at the way scholars dealt with this. It's fascinating. Almost every time someone brings this up, usually it's a New Testament scholar pointing out the apparent contradiction. They say, well the high priest in 1 Samuel 21 is Ahimelech, but Mark says the High priest is Abiathar. But in fact, if you go back and read 1 Samuel 21, it says nothing at all about Ahimelech being the high priest. It just says the priest Ahimelech. And there's a massive difference between the high priest and the priest. Anyone who's a descendant of Aaron could be an ordained priest in the Tabernacle, but the high priest is the one who is set above all the other priests, and there's only one serving at any given time. And what's interesting about that possible solution that Theophylact gives, and that makes it sound plausible to me, is that what Ahimelech is doing is taking care of the Bread of the Presence at the time of the Tabernacle in David's day.

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<sup>3</sup> Theophylact, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* 2:23-28; trans. C. Stade [11<sup>th</sup> century].

day. And if you look at the the laws of Moses in the Old Testament, it was not the high priest's duty to maintain the the Bread of the Presence on a weekly basis. That's a duty of just the the ordinary priests. So it actually makes perfect sense that Ahimelech would be the priest functioning on duty at that time on that Sabbath, maintaining the bread of the presence during the period of Abiathar's high priesthood, right? So there's actually no contradiction here between Mark and 1 Samuel, if you know the ins and outs and the details of ancient Jewish liturgy and the ancient Jewish Temple and the ancient Jewish priesthood. And this would not be the first time, as I've shown in my book on *Jesus and Last Supper*, where I look at the question the Passover, where people assume apparent contradictions just because they're unfamiliar with the details of Jewish liturgy, Jewish sacrifice and the Jewish Temple and priesthood. So an interesting solution there from Theophylact. I'll leave you with that as we continue our journey through the Gospel of Mark.