

## 5 Conflict in the Synagogue

Luke 4:14 – 6:11

### Leaving Nazareth, Jesus

went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, where he began teaching people on the sabbath. They were deeply impressed with his teaching, for he spoke with unmistakable authority.  
(4: 31 – 32)

Now possibly we think we understand this, taking our usual line of interpretation for gospel passages. Jesus went down to Capernaum where he joined in their Sabbath Day worship at the synagogue. He talked to them about God and the goodness of God and such things as we might expect to hear in a Sunday or Sabbath Day worship meeting.

Now while there is some truth in that picture, it is more misleading than not. For a start, Jewish Law decreed that the Temple in Jerusalem was the one and only place in which to worship of the God of Israel. Apart from what the gospels tell us, we do not know what happened in Galilean synagogues in Jesus' time. We can be sure that the teachings of the Law and the prophets were heard and discussed, but we do not know what forms of prayer or worship were acceptable. We can try to work back from what we know about later practice in Christian or Jewish meetings, but pretty well all such evidence comes from a time after the destruction of the Temple, and after Christians had split from the Jewish community, both of which most probably led to changes in the practice of meeting and worship.

We do know that there were leaders, who carried great authority, and we shall see that these, the wealthy elite, the devout and exemplary Pharisees and the trained experts in the Law, were often hostile to Jesus. They found his message, particularly his attitude to the Sabbath, unacceptable. But we also know that the synagogue was not a one-man or one-party show, in the way that a modern church is. However firmly the leaders held control, there was room for an ordinary, lay member of the community, or a visitor, to speak up, even if the speaker was not welcome to the leadership.

The to and fro of discussion, the people pressing their requests in spite of the leaders' disapproval, the arguments and the actions we read of in the gospels, sound more like a parish council or village meeting than a church service. It seems that the synagogue (the word means "assembly") was a gathering of the local community, perhaps normally held on the Sabbath when no one was working; that it

provided an opportunity for the natural leaders of the community (the wealthy and the exemplary) to tell the people how they should behave; it was a symbol of your inclusion in the community, and a place to affirm and honor God's Law, God's rule over Israel.

It was in such assemblies, talking with people in their normal civic and religious gatherings, that Jesus announced the coming rule or Kingdom of God and met the hostility of those who were used to being in charge of the proceedings. Perhaps they saw control over the lives of their community slipping from their grasp, for Jesus' way of approaching and dealing with people did not corroborate their claim to authority. He came without power or wealth, such as they normally relied on for status, yet he came with a personal attraction and authority that ordinary people appreciated. His strength was something very different from power as it is normally exercised in the politics of our world and those who were used to the exercise of such power were not looking for an alternative.

It is attested in all the gospels, but especially Mark's, which Luke is using here, that the power and authority of Jesus is a challenge to all our ideas of power and authority. Not that he sets aside the realms of social, civic and political life – far from it – but he follows none of their traditional ways to power. Now that he comes to present the authority of Jesus in action, Luke is content to use the text he has from Mark, for he shares the view of Mark when it comes to power and authority in the acts and the teaching of Jesus: that it is very different from the power that is exercised by the authorities established in Israel (or in any other society we would recognise).

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In Capernaum there was a man possessed by a demon. It recognised him and shouted out: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" But Jesus commanded the Spirit to be quiet and to leave the man alone. It disappeared, and the man was unharmed.<sup>1</sup> This was immediate authority, the evil spirit silenced and banished and the man saved, all at Jesus' command. Here was someone who could do good for his people, a savior for the weakest: the sick and the mentally disturbed.

Jesus cured many other people of illnesses and banished the demonic powers wherever he encountered them. The people of Capernaum took to him (as the people of Nazareth had not) and when he left the town they tried to keep him. But he told them: "I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to other towns also."<sup>2</sup> There is good news, and the good news (the gospel) is about the kingdom of God

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<sup>1</sup> 4: 31 - 37

<sup>2</sup> 4: 42 - 44

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now coming into their lives and changing their world. It can't be kept for one favored group, and towns all over Galilee must hear of it.

He was talking with a crowd by the shore of Lake Galilee, but they were pressing about him so much that he persuaded some fishermen who were washing their nets nearby to let him into a boat and take him a little way from the shore. There he could sit comfortably and speak without being smothered. (And the fishermen had nothing else to do. A thoroly unsuccessful nite's fishing had given them no catch at all.)

When he had finished with the crowd, Jesus turned to the needs of the fishermen. He told them to put out into deep water and pay out their nets – fine advice from a landlubber to experienced fishermen! But Simon, the boat's owner, had recognised the teacher's authority and had been impressed. He agreed to put out and to let down the nets. They caut so many fish that they had to call another boat to come and help them, and Simon fell down at Jesus' knees, saying: "Leave me, for I am a sinner Lord."

Simon had recognised that such awesome command of nature, following on the teaching he had heard, could only come from God, a holiness that to him was not so much salvation, as judgement. Simon is the first named individual to acknowledge Jesus' authority, and he greets him not as one who brings him long-awaited salvation, but as one whose goodness can only shine a lite of judgement from God on the ordinary sinfulness of Simon the fisherman.

But Jesus responded as the angels had done: "Don't be afraid," he sed. "From now on you'll be catching people." Simon and his partners, the brothers James and John, left their business and followed Jesus as his disciples.<sup>3</sup>

When we read of Jesus calling his disciples, we have to beware of false assumptions. We think we know what it's all about. Jesus has come to save souls. He calls disciples so that after he is dead and risen and "salvation" has been accomplished, they can spred the good news and bring others to believe in Jesus, because that is how they will be saved. It's a good idea, but it's not the gospel. In fact, it is the great Christian heresy of individual salvation: souls saved one by one thru belief in Jesus and individually keeping to his teachings. Salvation is the individual immortal soul getting to heven, and the disciples are to tell people how that is achieved (or to be the start of a church and a hierarchy which will tell them so in future generations).

I do not mean that this Christian heresy is totally wrong. Like our distortion of the manifesto, there is still much that is true and

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<sup>3</sup> 5: 1 – 11

important in it. It has inspired many people to persevere in faith, to live great lives and to win others to Jesus Christ. But it is heresy in the literal and original sense: separating out a part of the truth and taking it for the whole, so that you end up with a distorted gospel, and even the part you have kept is misrepresented.

It is important, when we read the scriptures, to take each writing as a whole and understand it as a whole, before we start mixing information from other sources; otherwise, we misunderstand. That is why, in this book, I am taking only the gospel according to Luke (except, of course, where Luke himself has taken chunks of Mark for his own text). It is Luke who is inspired with something to tell us, and we should give him our fullest attention. If we are not to corrupt the message even as we are hearing it, we must listen carefully, and try to leave aside all kind of assumptions and presuppositions that we bring from a long history of reinterpretation. We must first let Luke interpret Luke if we are to understand what he has written.

It is important that we understand who the disciples are and what is their mission, and for that we must be patient. Luke has his own understanding of the disciples' role, and it is different from Mark's, and even more different from what we have in mind, at least in the "heretical" version I have outlined above. Disciples follow a master, or teacher, learning to live as the master lives and to do as the master does. If we are to understand what that means in practice, and what it is for them to be "catching people", we must listen attentively to the story

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When Luke sets out to describe the work of Jesus in Galilee, he uses, as I have said, the text given him by Mark, to show the authority of Jesus effective in the ordinary life and civil society of his day. He tells of illness healed: Simon's mother-in-law cured of a fever, a leper, a paralysed man and a cripple. He tells of Jesus gathering disciples, of town and village meetings (the synagogue), and of conflict with local leaders and authorities. He shows us, in fact, Jesus involved in a ministry that is political in the basic meaning of that word, Jesus engaging with the affairs of his community, his "polis" or civil society.

Jesus' works of healing are not some kind of fringe religious activity, like faith healing at a revivalist meeting. When he heals the sick, he touches on the foremost concerns of people in his society, for all knew and dreaded sickness, which could rob them of a livelihood, impoverish their families or bring down suspicion of punishment by God for wrongdoing. A healer was indeed a savior, in an immediate and practical way. Nor is it any less of an issue in our own day.

We have only to think how obsessed we are about the possibilities of illness. In national politics, both in Britain and in America, health

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becomes an election issue: the National Health Service, private practice, medical insurance, Medicare, the drugs industry making fortunes out of every ailment from headaches to cancer, the status of doctors, the sanctity of nurses – and this in a world where science has given us cures for many of our ills, and sickness does not mean the condemnation of whole families to poverty. (I am of course speaking of the wealthy world, the “North”.)

In Jesus’ world (as in the impoverished “South” today) the sick and afflicted were not put away in hospitals but were to be found at home, or anywhere around the village, begging, appealing for pity and help where none could provide a cure, hoping for some alleviation of their pain. They were an ever-present fact of street and civic life. They too (except for the lepers) would come to the synagogue where the whole town was gathered.

The synagogue meeting, as we see from the actions and discussions that took place there, was more than a performance of worship. It was the town or village meeting where they honored God and the people were told by superior citizens how they were to behave. The wealthy, the landowners, gave orders as leaders in the gathering, and men of good reputation set the tone. The party of the Pharisees, dedicated to the full observance of the Law of God, and usually vindicated by their prosperity, led by their moral standing and public religious commitment. And if necessary, in matters of law the professional opinion of the “scribes”, or lawyers, could be called upon.

This is the microcosm of a Galilean village or town community, and Luke (taking his cue from Mark) is showing us Jesus as he enters into this busy world of needs and answers, of leaders and led, of experts and the common people, of wealth and influence and status, and of poor, suffering bodies broken by illness. It is a real world, Jesus’ world, not the mythical setting for some religious paradigm. We do violence to the gospel when we imagine that Jesus was directing people’s thoughts away from this world to a better one, for he took up and showed his authority in the regular business of his own community, as they strove to order their lives, to survive or to dominate in their dependence on one another.

And that is why he got into trouble. The healing of physical and emotional ills was not a serious problem; but that Jesus did so within the public meetings of his community, was a problem. There was already a class that led and managed the public meeting; and they were used to controlling the solutions, to telling, and not to being told. Jesus, talking about the coming rule of God, and healing people in the town meeting, and doing his work on the one day reserved for the religious leaders to set their shining example, all this was cutting across the established patterns of behaviour and threatening the carefully constructed order of society.

The most serious challenge came in the healing of a paralytic man.<sup>4</sup> The man's friends had taken great trouble to get him to Jesus (breaking open the roof of the house where Jesus was crowded in and letting him down on a stretcher) and Jesus' response was to tell him: "Your sins are forgiven." No doubt the common people accepted it on faith, but some of the Pharisees and their experts who were there checking up on Jesus knew better. "Only God can forgive sins," they muttered.

"What's easier to say," Jesus asked them, "Your sins are forgiven? or Stand up and walk?" Then he said to the paralysed man: "Get up and take your stretcher home with you." The man stood up, took up his stretcher, and carried it home praising God.

We should not imagine that Jesus was challenging his hearers with a claim to be God, but that he knew he was speaking with the full authority of God. Ultimately, the declaration of forgiveness does point to Jesus' divinity, for Jewish tradition did not recognise any delegation of this authority. But for the moment it points rather to the authority given to Jesus, which does go beyond all precedents. When Jesus declares the forgiveness of sins "Your sins are forgiven" he reaches beyond the Law, which could only offer the rituals prescribed for receiving God's forgiveness. Not even Moses forgave sin, and the power of the priests was only to explain and conduct the relevant rituals.

When Jesus speaks of forgiveness, he speaks as the prophets spoke, the prophet Nathan who told David: "Yahweh forgives your sin. You will not die."<sup>5</sup> or the prophet who announced to Judah in exile:

"Console your people, console them" says your God  
"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her,  
that her time of service is ended, that her sin is atoned for."  
(Isaiah 40: 2)

But for those prophets it was a matter of reporting the forgiveness of God, and they were careful to cast themselves as the messengers of God. Jesus, however, speaks the word of God in a new, authoritative way, without need to preface it with "Thus says the Lord." He says simply "Your sins are forgiven." as if he is in that moment carrying out the act. There is in him an authority to speak for God as if his very being carries that authority. That is what scandalises the Pharisees.

When we talk about the "divinity of Christ" we are too quick to speak of a divine nature in Jesus, an ontological reality to be proven by

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<sup>4</sup> 5: 17 - 26

<sup>5</sup> II Sam 12: 13

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miracles. But what the gospel shows us is Jesus in action, what he says and what he does, and it leads us to think first about the relationship of Jesus to God, and of God to us. We have been told of the deep heart of mercy in God, whence salvation comes, in the forgiveness of sins;<sup>6</sup> and now we see and hear Jesus saying to the paralysed man: “Your sins are forgiven.”

When he is challenged on this, he does not explain or excuse himself, as if he is only reporting a word given him by God; rather he demonstrates that he has the authority he has shown. It is in him to save and to heal, as much as to forgive (only it will be easier for onlookers to see the healing). He says to the paralysed man: “Get up. Take your stretcher and go home.”

Our trouble is that we think we know what God is. We think it is up to us (or the gospel) to show that Jesus is that. But it is not so. We don't know what God is and we don't know who Jesus is. In the gospel, in the life and the words and the actions of Jesus, we are learning to know Jesus, but we are also beginning to discover who God is and what God does. And it is all in the context of forgiveness, healing, salvation. When God is revealed in action, it is God forgiving, healing, saving.

Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees, with the synagogue leaders and the legal experts, was not just a difference of theologies in a purely religious dispute. Or rather it was a difference of theology, real theology, which is learning about God whom we meet in the world, in the living, pulsating action of a community, a people; in the striving, loving, hating, dreaming, suffering body of humanity in which each one of us finds and has defined for us our own humanity. Between Jesus and the Pharisees a serious dispute was brewing, about God, in whom and from whom are the values on which society is structured, order is maintained, and influence and authority recognised, in whom we come to know ourselves.

That is why I say that Jesus' activity was “political”. It was to do with the way we live together and organise ourselves in society, and so with the systems of power on which the social order is built. His opponents, the elite who controlled his society, recognised this at once and soon showed their opposition to his way of understanding God and the human order.

The social and political order of Galilee was complex. The province, like all the Mediterranean world, was ultimately subject to the Roman army, whose Commander-in-chief ruled the Roman Empire. A local king, Herod, had been appointed to rule as Rome's agent and a strong party of Galileans supported this arrangement. In the past, rebellions

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1; Luke 1: 77 - 78

against Roman rule had been savagely put down and people had learnt the lesson, altho there was still a group, the zealots, who were inclined to fite. Most of the time, people accepted that they could not throw off the power of Rome, but must learn to preserve their national identity and self-respect within the Roman order.

With power firmly in the hands of the Roman army, and such local kings as the Romans saw fit to put in control of one province or another, the economy of the empire was made to serve Roman interests, taxed to underpin the luxury and power of those who ruled the army and so the world. For the Romans, it was a virtuous circle of power that would see them in control for another four hundred years. For others, like Herod, the Roman-appointed king in Galilee, and his party, loyal service to their Roman masters was rewarded with their own mesure of welth and power – enuf to keep them loyal.

But there remained the ancient culture, history and identity of the Israelite people of Judea and Galilee. No empire, however powerful, can manage without those local patterns of law, tradition and religion that keep life in place and people in order according to their own accepted principles. And even a conquered people have their identity, in which they continue to organise their lives in all those daily and local matters that are beneath their conquerors' serious notice, except in so far as the net result is order and productivity.

The Galileans were Israelites and they had accepted the leadership of Jerusalem, the Jewish reform of ancient Israelite religion which had taken place over the previous four hundred years. They recognised the Law of Moses, the teachings of the Prophets, and the uniqueness of the Temple in Jerusalem as the only rightful place to worship Israel's God. But geographically and legally they were a different province from Judea. Between the two there stood the hostile region of Samaria, whose people also inherited the old Israelite religion but refused to accept Jerusalem and were not recognised by the Jews.

In Israel of Jesus' time, Galilee and Judea, there were those who, without sharing in imperial power, were nonetheless looked up to as leaders of the Israelite people: the priests (in Jerusalem), the scribes and lawyers, the welthy landowners, and the party of devout and sophisticated Jews, dedicated to scrupulous observance of God's law, who were called "Pharisees". All these could claim a moral leadership, which, combined with their economic power, gave them an influence which even the Romans would recognise, provided they used it to keep the lesser masses in order, content with their work and their god.

These were the "natural" leaders of Israel. They resented, of course, the domination of the Romans, which prevented them from taking full and soveren control of the people, and they hated the collaborators, Herod and his supporters. Especially, they hated the tax collectors,

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the greedy little men who would sell their birthright for the power to plunder their neighbors as they collected the Roman taxes. But at least, morally they could look down on them all: idolaters, pagans, and vicious Jews lured by luxury and power to betray their own people. They could tell themselves – and others – that such sinners were hateful in the sight of God and would all be destroyed in the day of his judgement.

As pious people whose piety was blessed by God with prosperity, they valued their standing in Israelite society. Rich enough to give leisure to the study of the Law and to the minutiae of social behavior as laid down by the most authoritative traditions, they were guaranteed a hearing in the synagogue. They could expect to lead from status, comfortable in the conviction that their leadership was good for the moral fibre and steady order of society. They could look down, either with contempt or with patronising kindness, on the ignorant crowd, the labourers, peasants and small craftsmen, whom they led. Such people, altho they were Israelites, knew so little of the Law of Moses that they were breaking it every day, and had to be constantly reminded by their betters of the behavior required by God and good society.

So they drew their lines thru society, separating such as themselves, God's people chosen by him to fulfil in all its purity the Law of God, from the foreigners whose wickedness hid from them the truth of God and the beauty of his Law, and such fallen Israelites as were willing to do their business, to enter their houses and take their hands like friends. On the wrong side of that line were all such people, as well as the "ignorant" Israelites, the poor people and the sick, who were not, like them, blessed with knowledge of the Law.

Into this society Jesus came, not with a message of salvation in another world, making all this irrelevant, but with a message of salvation for this society, challenging it to be changed by the healing hand of God. When he found another disciple, it was one of those traitors who got rich collecting Roman taxes. He met him by the customs house, and in the end, the man gave up his career, his chances of wealth and everything, to follow Jesus. Levi was his name, and he threw a great party in his house in honor of Jesus. He invited all his friends – many of them traitors and collaborators like himself of course – to meet and to hear his new teacher.<sup>7</sup>

It was high scandal – News of the World stuff – that a man with pretensions to moral leadership should be found partying with the traitors of society. The established leadership, the Pharisees whose moral reputation was beyond question, were quick to point out to his

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<sup>7</sup> 5: 27 - 32

disciples how their master was leading them astray, but Jesus answered them:

“It’s not the well and the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I haven’t come to call the virtuous, but to call sinners to repentance.”  
(5: 31 – 32)

They weren’t impressed. It wasn’t much of a repentance to be feasting and partying. They pointed out to him that not only the followers of the Pharisees, but the disciples of John too had regularly fasted and prayed, whereas Jesus’ disciples spent their time eating and drinking. Here they were on high moral ground indeed, but they were also revealing their weakness. For Jesus was not the first to challenge the Pharisees’ moral leadership. John too had clashed with them, and, by citing him now, the Pharisees were tacitly admitting that he had a popular following, in spite of his criticism of them. But John was now out of the way, in Herod’s prison, and his criticism could not hurt them as Jesus might.

So they were happy to point out that, whether you looked to their own example, or the perhaps more “prophetic” example of someone like John, either way you didn’t see the pattern of behavior that Jesus was presenting. Jesus did not come up to the best religious standards.

Jesus’ answer did not denounce fasting, but turned on the time for fasting. This, of course, was crucial to the Pharisees’ position. There were periods and times for fasting, and knowing the rules and being in a position to remind others, officially, of the requirements for fasting was part of one’s status. When those who normally ate well took time out for fasting, it could be put forward as an example of virtue. The poor of course also fasted, but that was when the crop failed or the breadwinner got no work, and it didn’t count. It wasn’t fasting in the meaning of the rules.

Going without food only signified when it was done in dutiful response to the requirements of the Law. Then it demonstrated your adherence to tradition and to the laws of your God. It was pious and patriotic all together, and established your credentials as a respected citizen. Jesus’ answer, like so many of his answers, goes right past the surface squabble to the hidden core of the issue: the propriety and the timing of the fast.

Only he doesn’t accept that this can be decided by such laws as the scribes were expert in. It had a far more natural and human basis. God’s requirements are not some arbitrary test designed to interrupt the flow of natural life, but rather the fullest expression of life and its changing seasons. You don’t fast when you’re celebrating a wedding. When the bridegroom is in the house with his friends, you party. The time will come, Jesus tells them, when the bridegroom will be taken

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away, and that will be a time for fasting. It will be the time of God's choosing, and those who fast will do so in true obedience to God.

This is not some merely religious argument, where both sides get worked up about something that doesn't matter in the "real" world. Nor is it a case of Jesus pointing to some other-worldly reality against the Pharisees' literal and worldly kind of religion. Jesus and the Pharisees are contending for the shape and soul of the society in which they are living. It is the Pharisees who argue for a largely "transcendent" ideal, the Law of God so pure and holy that it is beyond the grasp of most ordinary people, beyond the grasp of all who haven't had the time and the training and the moral discipline to understand it. Most people have to be told, and to be given the many rules that will keep them from offending in ignorance. It is Jesus who presents the Law of God as something to be understood from within this world, from the events and experiences of life as everyone finds it: from a wedding, the loss of a friend, sickness and healing.

This is not the way that Israel's leaders have been understanding God. They have built a society on elitism, the privileges of wealth and influence sitting comfortably with the privilege of knowledge and moral expertise. Those who have not the wealth and influence and the proper ethical training must submit to be told, in short to be controlled, in the interests of a moral, orderly and Godly society. This was the ideal which the Jewish leadership fostered not only in Judea but in the province of Galilee too. By such ideals they sought to create a Jewish and Israelite nation in the face of such realities as the Roman army and their puppet kings.

This was not an argument between rival theologians, a disagreement among clergy about the practices of religion. It was about the very life of the nation, and in the coming of God's rule, society itself, the people, were being given a new shape and a new life. You couldn't just tack that on to the old order. You don't take new cloth and cut it up to mend old clothes. You don't put new wine, still bursting with life, into old, dried-out wineskins. If you do, the wineskins break and the good wine is lost.<sup>8</sup>

There should be no illusions about Jesus' mission. The very controversies into which it brings him testify to the challenge: a radical change in society which society's entrenched rulers cannot accept. The argument about fasting was followed by another clash, over the Sabbath, the weekly day of rest that was sacred in the Law of Moses.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 5: 36 – 39

<sup>9</sup> 6: 1 – 5; cf. Exodus 20: 8 – 11; 23: 12

As Jesus and his disciples were walking thru a cornfield, they were picking ears of wheat, rubbing the husks off between their hands and eating them. Technically, they were harvesting and winnowing, tasks forbidden on the sabbath, and some of the Pharisees criticised them for this. But Jesus quoted them the example of David and his followers, who, on the run from Saul's troops, had eaten the consecrated bread at the shrine of Nob. Their need justified a suspension of the normal law. That is, both David and the Priest of Nob had agreed that they had the power to judge when the rules could be set aside.<sup>10</sup>

That power Jesus now claims. With the coming of the kingdom of God, the "Son of Man",<sup>11</sup> ruling in God's name, has authority over the sabbath. And Jesus shows that authority when he confronts the Pharisees and their experts at another synagogue meeting.<sup>12</sup> There was a man there with a crippled hand, and the leaders were watching to see what Jesus would do. To work as a doctor was also forbidden on the sabbath. But Jesus again raised the fundamental question: not nice technical distinctions between the types of permissible and impermissible activity, but the question whether the sabbath was really about doing good and avoiding evil. Surely the law of the sabbath was not given to prevent people from doing good? He told the man to stretch out his hand and there on the sabbath he publicly healed him. This was no blasphemy in a private house, no quiet infringing of the sabbath out on a path thru the cornfields. This was an act of defiance in the synagogue itself, the town's public meeting where everyone could see, where the ruling elite were used to being in charge and laying down the law. They were furious. They determined to deal with Jesus.

We should not imagine that the sabbath question was some peripheral religious concern, the Pharisees being some kind of Lord's Day Observance Society, irrelevant to the main flow of civic and political activity. The control of leisure and leisure time has always been essential to the control of society. While control of work is more important, it is also more easily managed, and men with money have the means to do that. But it's in their leisure time that people start questioning and discussing alternatives. The Romans recognised that they had to supply the restless mobs with "bread and games", and the power of the media in our own day comes not from the fact that it gives us information or keeps us working, but from the fact that it entertains. Television fills the hours when we are not working. Many

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<sup>10</sup> I Sam 21: 2 – 7

<sup>11</sup> This is an important title in the gospel, but it is introduced here without explanation, deliberately. It refers somehow to Jesus himself, but also to a representative figure expected to appear with the final vindication of Israel. Like Luke, I will leave further explanation till later, because it can only be fully understood as the story unfolds.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 6: 6 – 11

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a reader buys The Sun “only for the football”, but they still read the headlines.

When the scribes and the Pharisees insisted on meticulous observance of the Sabbath it was not from some merely pedantic legalism. They were ensuring that they, the experts and leaders in their little or larger communities, were able to tell the people how they might use their leisure, and that in such little time as the working people had for sitting and listening, whether on God’s business or the community’s business, they would be listening to the established leaders, the landowners who headed the synagogue, the Pharisees, the scribes.

I do not mean that the Pharisees’ religion was merely a cynical device. There is much evidence that they strongly believed in the rules and doctrines they propounded, as the ruling elite nearly always believe that the laws and policies which they promote are the right rules for a stable and prosperous community. Their own success under such laws vindicates them. Indeed, from the feudal lords of old Europe to the Neo-cons of our own day, elites tend to take the fact that they greatly benefit from the application of the laws they promote as conclusive evidence that they are right.

It was not different in Jesus’ day, and Jesus challenged that complacency. Because it contained that challenge, his message of salvation was not welcome. It’s natural enough to be glad when you’re healed of a fever, or when a hand twisted and locked with arthritis is set loose, but those who have their own program for God, in which God upholds the respectable and blesses with prosperity the leaders of society, are not pleased to find God mixing with sinners, all too easily forgiving, and forgetful of the binding importance of rules. For them the world is clearly divided between those who know how to run it by the proper rules and those who need to be led; and God, when he comes to save his people, must recognise the distinction.

For those who believe they own God, that God is already committed to their vindication, the real coming of God, and the dawn of salvation is, frankly, unacceptable. Whether because they are God’s kin with first claim on his attention, or because they, of all the community, most faithfully abide by his rules, they expect to be acknowledged in proper order. They reject, like the people in Nazareth and the Pharisees and the experts, an approach that confronts, instead of confirming, their status. They reject that dawn of salvation that comes with Jesus of Nazareth.

Salvation will not be the triumph of the good guys. God’s salvation is for the humble who know they are in the wrong, for the needy who are glad and grateful to be helped, for those who are willing to repent, to let their lives and their society, their hearts and their world, be

changed. Salvation, when it comes, is a revolution, and it does not figure for those who don't want to change.

When Jesus, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, in the presence of his community's established leaders, led to the crippled man "Stretch out your hand" he was making his own challenge to the rules of influence and power that governed his society. He was carrying out his manifesto from the prophet Isaiah and fulfilling John's prophetic message. People are healed and set free and old sins are brought to an end in a new and different life. This is the coming of salvation that fulfils the hope of the priest Zechariah for a dawn of forgiveness and reconciliation, and Miriam's prediction of a new society where pride, power and wealth are overthrown.