

Life on earth has been much enhanced by the development of information technology. It is amusing now for me to think back to the earlier years of my ministry, of the hours I used to spend typing up pew sheets, articles for the parish magazine, and whatever else, on my portable typewriter. As for homilies (sermons), they were all written up with pen and paper and saved in a file for every year's worth of preaching, and they continue to occupy most of my filing cabinet. Now I cannot imagine life without my computer and smartphone which provide a quick and comfortable way to write, a convenient access route to family and the rest of the world, arranging travel and calling up details that I may have forgotten or would take ages researching in books.

But like all good things the internet and all information technology have a downside. A priest friend told me that he had given up using Facebook because it was consuming his life. I am always rather sad to see, on my regular early morning walks, people walking, with or without a dog in tow, and sometimes even joggers, glued to their technical devices when there is so much else to enjoy at that time of day. We have the great Atlantic Ocean in front of our eyes, the scenic mountains which are often blessed by amazing cloud formations; and there are also other people around, fellow travellers on planet Earth, some of whom happy to exchange a friendly 'good morning.' I am tempted to tell the phone addicts to 'get a life!'

The Internet, social media, and other useful 'life supports' are all good as long as we have control over them, but when they are allowed to control us, they turn us into obsessive, addicted, socially diminished people. That appears to be something like the affliction suffered by the Pharisees in today's Gospel reading. In our first reading we had the ancient commandment about keeping the Sabbath day holy. Its intention was that it would be a day set aside by the community for the worship of God and rest from work. The Sabbath was a reward for a liberated people who were once slaves. It enhanced their human dignity and was a response to the scripture that even God rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath ensured that there was a day every week in which the whole community could share in the freedom, joy, and rest of its creator.

But by the time of Jesus some of the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, had turned this socially and religiously liberating commandment into an obsession with a minefield of prohibitions. So we find Jesus being criticised for doing good

things on the Sabbath like plucking food from the wayside to satisfy hunger, and of healing the sick, because these activities were seen as forbidden work. Many years ago, when I was working at a Jewish summer camp in the United States, staff were advised that if we needed to drive into town on Shabbat, the Saturday Sabbath, we should check that none of our colleagues with an ultra-religious disposition was nearby who could be offended by the starting of a car! Some things have not changed, it seems. It is all a far cry from the Jewish Jesus who responds to the Pharisees that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. Jesus held that anything that was going to benefit people, should not be used or withdrawn so as to cause harm, Sabbath day or not.

Jesus' defiance of the Pharisees is not a rejection of the Sabbath law. On the contrary, he is drawing them back to its true purpose. So it is not the man with the withered hand who has the biggest problem. It is the Pharisees who were 'withered in their minds.' (St Athanasius). Biologically, withering occurs when something is detached from the source of life. These Pharisees were spiritually withered because their obsessive legalism subverted the deeper logic of the commandment. It prevented them from celebrating Jesus' healing and liberating work. And we read that Jesus 'looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.' His anger flowed from his compassion. Throughout the Gospels we find Jesus upset at the damage that his opponents do, both to the people they oppress and to themselves.

At the end of our Gospel reading, Mark tells us that the Pharisees 'went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.' Having refused and condemned Jesus' invitation to do good and save life on the Sabbath, they go to the other extreme and show malice on the Sabbath. It seems that for them, the Sabbath rule did not cover what was in your heart and mind. The withered hearts and minds of the Pharisees now lead them to plot the murder of the life-giving Jesus. And on the Sabbath! Their hypocrisy is complete.

Not all Pharisees thought and acted like this. Many of them were good people and some even admired Jesus. But for those we meet in the Gospel today, their legalism and pedantry demonstrate a serious problem which all human beings face. Are we in control of our lives or are we *being* controlled? There is

no doubt that power controlled the Pharisees. They claimed it as coming from God, from Moses, from the Jewish Law. Jesus sought to show them how they were misusing, even abusing what was sacred to them, how they had so miserably distorted the divine law.

Our coming together for worship today is hopefully the compulsory weekly gathering of a liberated people, a people driven by the Spirit of the living God whose laws are good and life-giving. Today's Gospel offers us a choice. Spiritually, it is a choice between life and death. Jesus invites us to 'get a life,' which means not being controlled by the fads, trends, or anything else with which modern life tries to seduce us, and that we reject anything in our religious or faith life that prevents us from being loving, compassionate, inclusive, and just.