

May these words be pleasing.

Picture the scene: Andrew and I had managed to find a seat, a table, in a crowded café in Skipton on market day earlier last week. Two young waitresses were busily trying to keep up with serving and taking orders – the place was very busy and they were being worked hard. As one went past the table next to us the woman at the end of the table with deliberate loudness demanded ‘where’s my steak pie?’ A forthright lady, she had successfully gained the attention of the whole room. Clearly the service was slow. Do you admire such forthrightness – or is your instinct (like mine) to cringe – don’t make a scene. The steak pie soon arrived. That wasn’t quite the end of it. The phone belonging to the chap with her started to ring. He answered and began his conversation on the phone. He too was chastised – ‘would you shush – there’s other people in the room’.

Which Jesus do you follow? The Jesus who is ‘meek and mild’, ‘the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes’? Or the one who attracts argument and division, and responds to it? Which Jesus should we try to imitate, try to copy? To be fair in today’s gospel reading it wasn’t Jesus who started the argument. It was the leader of the synagogue, who clearly wasn’t happy, was not content with a quiet word, but instead spoke to the crowd and kept on telling the crowd that what was happening was wrong. What should Jesus do? Keep quiet, or respond? What would you do?

Andrew and I were travelling again on Thursday as we drove to Carlisle, parked on the outskirts, and cycled into the city centre. It was the afternoon rush hour, it was dry but the clouds were down, the air seemed thick and there was a blustery wind funnelling between the buildings. I said to Andrew do you notice that everyone seems tense, on edge. When you feel anxiety around it seems prudent to ride with soft hands, to think with soft hands. (I wish to learn to ride with soft hands more often). We past the woman screaming, really loudly, at her children, the man and the policewoman arguing, both animated and speaking at the same time, the couple upset and arguing with the platform staff at the railway station. And a general all round feeling of edgy-ness. Who knows why: The weather? Thursday was also GCSE results day. Brexit. The cricket test match?

I guess if Jesus was a cyclist he would ride with soft hands, but not afraid to ride through the rush hour traffic. Or if you’ve been watching the cricket he would be a batsmen who plays with soft hands but is not afraid of taking on the hostile fast bowling. He is journeying from village to village on his way to Jerusalem, and there are crowds, there always seem to be crowds. I daresay Jesus felt an atmosphere of anxiety, of stress, of conflict and edgy-ness. And it’s from this crowd and this edgy-ness that the leader of the Jewish community, to which Jesus belongs, takes a stand. What he condemns is not so much what Jesus is doing but when Jesus is doing it. Jesus heals the woman who has been crippled for 18 years and he does this on the Sabbath, the holy day of the Jews. The leader of the

synagogue, indignant, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not today on the Sabbath day.”

It's easy to condemn the leader of the synagogue. It takes a degree of inhumanity to be angry and upset upon seeing a woman being freed from her crippling illness of 18 years. There are two possible ways, however, to defend the indefensible, to stand up for the leader of the synagogue in today's gospel story, two possible cases for the defence.

Argument for the defence number one: The reading from Isaiah. It says, “Refrain from trampling the Sabbath, call the Sabbath a delight, honour it.” Some of us have been to services in which the ten commandments were read out to remind us of the law of God. In at number 4: You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy. In some churches we can still see this commandment (and all the others) painted on the wall teach us the law of God. And what exactly do we think of this law, chiselled in stone and brought down from the stormy mountain by Moses (or Charlton Heston). What does it mean (to us): Remember and keep the Sabbath day holy?

We have an answer from the synagogue leader: There are six days on which work ought to be done”. On this, our seventh day, we dedicate this Sabbath to God. Which brings a new question: What is the work of Jesus? He is God and his job (for want of a better word) is salvation and teaching, teaching us and showing us the kingdom of God. This is what we see, What do the crowds see? They are focussed on Jesus the healer – that is his work. I am in the crowd, I have come to Jesus so that he may heal my mother, my father, my brother, my sister, my child. The work of Jesus is to heal. There are six good days for this work to be done, but not on the Sabbath. There is an irony: The work and job of the synagogue leader is to guide and lead the people. This is precisely what he does on the Sabbath. And note also the soft hand response of Jesus. He does not dismiss the synagogue leader as being wrong and mistaken about the law of God. He points out instead the care we all take even with our animals on the Sabbath – how much more should we wish to take care of the crippled lady. If Jesus is to be condemned then so also is everyone else.

Jesus never denies the law but instead increases our imagination for its size and scope and wonder. Instead of just one day dedicated to God what if all our work was dedicated to God, each action, however small, offered up as a constant prayer, and worship and praise. Now that would be quite something – this morning you have sung this ideal as you have many times before: Seven whole days, not one in seven (x2) – a life long Sabbath, a life dedicated to God and the Kingdom of God.

I said there were two arguments for the defence of the synagogue leader. The second is quite different. I aim each summer to have a few days on my own on the bike and this year I had a route from the bottom left of Wales through St Davids and cutting across

Snowdonia. I'd mentioned my route before I set off to our resident Welsh expert, Clare, and explained that I was struggling with the correct pronunciation of a town that I would visit. I think it's something like Dol-goch-lie. When I finally got there, somewhat wet, the only person I talked to was Polish. I asked him how to pronounce the town. Oh, he said, it's very simple.. Everyone from around here calls it Doll, just Doll.

It's a while since I have been through the centre of Wales and in this time all the road signs are now in both English and Welsh – with Welsh first. A deliberate collective desire to promote and protect the Welsh language and Welsh identity. For if this is not done, it could be lost.

The synagogue leader represents and leads a people under great stress. They have a history of being threatened and conquered and they find themselves once again under the rule of others – this time the Romans who hold the fate of the Jewish people in their hands. Simple marks of identity such as worship in the temple, circumcision and keeping the Sabbath were vitally important if the Jewish nation and people were to survive. Given the desire of others to wipe out this Jewish identity we can surely be sympathetic to that fear driving the synagogue leader to condemn this maverick teacher. So ends the case for the defence!

So who is right? Hold on to that which is good. Jesus would claim that his way is good, but so too would the synagogue leader, as do we. And do countless voices both past and present holding different, opposing, views. The Romans did, the Jews and Palestinians do today, as do the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish, the English, the British, the Europhiles, the hard left, the extreme right. In times of anxiety and edgy-ness the charismatic voices from the extremes strive to become the populist voice and gather a following. Each of us will claim to hold on to that which is good, and each will decide what it is that we claim to be good, or it is decided for us. In the context of our Church and Christian faith and Christian heritage we will continue to seek and define the good in continued fellowship with each other, in worship, in reading God's word and prayer. None of us would claim to have a full understanding of the good that is God but in those times when we face anxiety, edgy-ness, when we need soft hands, then a reminder of the list of the Paul's fruits of the spirit would be a good starting point.

When facing anxiety, edgy-ness and conflict hold on to the fruits of the Spirit. These are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. Hold on to that which is good. Amen