

“What to do with a gift?” Luke 13:10-17

“Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.”

Today’s Gospel text can be of a great help to realize what are our misunderstandings regarding the holy day and how they determine our attitudes and actions.

Let’s pay attention to this event. Jesus was continually teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. He had noticed that there was a woman. She had had a health problems for the last 18 [!] years. She was bent by her sickness and could not fully straighten herself.

Jesus called her ‘a daughter of Abraham’. Probably she was a descendent of their forefather Abraham, but may be this title implied even more. As Paul was later writing, - through our faith and trust to God we are children of Abraham.

So on one of the Sabbaths Jesus called this woman to come forward. Imagine her moving forward, everyone is confused and intrigued, why would this teacher call that woman to come in front of the synagogue. What is going to happen?

When she was there Jesus said: “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” He laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. What a miracle!

Imagine it happening here today. What would be our reaction? Awe? Surprise? Perhaps a little bit of fear. How could this happen?! If the Holy Spirit was working into our hearts, it probably would be a great joy to see our sister healed. Praise and glory be to God!

That’s what this woman did. Glorified God. But, surprisingly, not all of those present were happy about it. As Luke describes it, “the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”

What is wrong with this man, we may wonder? He was supposed to rejoice, but, instead, he was indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. So what?

Let's review what the Sabbath was and why it was instituted. In Genesis 2 we read that God "blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (Gen 2:3 ESV)

It is not that He was tired, not that all the activities ceased. What had happened, God had created this wonderful world, this very good world and it was ready to function as it was designed. It was shalom.

There was no evening for this seventh day. It was meant to be the condition in which we would all live, with God dwelling among us and we enjoying His holy presence. But we lost it after the Fall.

When God Yahweh, as a part of salvation plan for entire humanity, had led Israel out of Egypt, even before He had given them the Ten Commandments, He already established the Sabbath.

This day was meant to remind that God Himself takes care of us, that He Himself provides for our daily needs, that we can have peace on mind and trust in our hearts, that He is faithful God, fully capable to deliver what He had promised.

For Israelites it meant to have a food, this manna from heaven, every day, and then double portion on the sixth day, so that on the Sabbath they could rest with their families and to enjoy God's goodness. How telling!

Later, when the Commandments were given, they highlighted two reasons for the Sabbath. "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:11) And "You shall remember that [...] the LORD your God brought you out from [slavery] there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." (Deut. 5:15)

To translate it into the Church language. The first reason for the Sabbath was to remember and to trust our God and Creator, who abundantly provides for our daily needs. From Him we receive everything. The second reason was to remember that God is our Saviour, that He had liberated us all from the slavery to sin, death and devil.

These both reasons formed a framework for the Sabbath. To have a day off, to rest from our activities and to let God the Father to be our God, to enjoy this day in His presence here, where He had invited us and promised to listen to our prayers and to bless us.

So what was wrong with this ruler of the synagogue? What had happened along the way? The Jews had lost the idea of the Sabbath as a gift of God. They had turned the observance of the Sabbath into the Law.

Of course, we can say, that partly it is true. God demands us to have this day off and to spend it in His presence. It is the commandment, it is not optional; only if we have nothing better to do. We

can call it a categorical gift, but it is still a gift. It is given for our sake and for our benefit, something we receive and not something we do.

The Jews had lost it. For them it was not permitted to do any work in the Sabbath. They had categorized 39 groups of different works. If anything you did fell into any of these 39 groups, you were violating the Sabbath. For each of these 39 groups of works there were endless amount of additional rules and conditions which made it quite challenging to hold the Sabbath properly.

Sometimes they were ridiculous. There are testimonies about discussions whether it is permitted to spit on the Sabbath, because it can be seen as watering. There was certain distance you could make on the Sabbath, but it didn't apply to traveling on water. So the question was posed, if you travel with your cart and sit on barrel with water, can you travel longer distance without breaking the Sabbath laws.

We can see what had gone wrong. They had turned the gift of God into their work. For them the focus was largely on the proper conduct of the Sabbath, not on what God was doing for them. It had to be vice versa as Jesus said: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (Mar 2:27)

We can see that what clashed in this event is not just Jesus actions versus the attitude of the ruler of synagogue. They had totally different views on what the Sabbath was for. For Jesus the Sabbath was the time when we take a rest from our daily worries. When we trust our Lord that He will take care of our lives. When we come into God's holy presence, where He Himself had promised to be and to listen to us, when we listen to His life giving words and receive His blessings.

For the other gentlemen that was quite opposite. Of course, for Him the Sabbath still was about reading and learning the word of God, but the greatest focus was on the correct keeping of the Sabbath rules. Not God given, but self devised and burdensome.

Just think about the irony of this situation. Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself was doing His work, His Father's work, teaching and taking care of His people, forgiving, healing, rescuing from the power of Satan. Delivering God's blessings exactly as He had promised to do. And this other gent objected, for His understanding about the Sabbath didn't permit it. How sad...

I'm quite sure that we don't have an identical problem here in Australia. But what is this holy day for us? What the Sunday and the Divine Service are for us?

Quite often, and especially for those outside of the Church, or even those who had started to drift away from the Church, our gathering on Sundays is about something we do. We err so much holding that this is something that we do to be good Christians. 'If we are in church on Sunday, at least sometimes, we have done our part, and our God has to be pleased, and this has to be enough for Him.' No!

We need to realize what is the Biblical understanding about this holy day, we need to understand that this is a gift of God; very precious gift, which He has bought paying such a terrible price.

Just think what a gift is and how do we usually receive gifts? What message is sent to us, when someone gives us gift? They want to express their attitude, to be in relations with us, to express their appreciation, to show their love.

When our loved ones give us gift, what do we do? Accept it with joy and thanksgiving. How would we feel if we had prepared a gift, from all our heart, paying such a high price, and a person to whom we give it, wouldn't pay any attention to it? What would it mean? How would we understand it? What message we are sending with our attitude towards God's gifts? With our 'if this is "only" a gift, not my obligation, I can ignore it.'

What we have here, the Divine Service, is even more than a gift. In the beginning God dwelt with man. At the end, when Christ returns in His glory, He will again dwell among us and we'll know Him as our God. But because our God loves us so much He wanted to be with us already now and to bless us already now. He wanted to start the eternal feast already here on earth. To invite us and to feed us.

Jesus gift to us is the forgiveness of all our sins, which He bought paying with His sufferings an even giving up His own life. He bought us ticket to the eternal feast in His kingdom. He gives us this ticket as a gift in our Baptism. But, just think about it... the ticket is not the feast. The ticket just enables us to come and to join this feast.

The feast has begun! It takes place right here. I wish we could see all the participants in this feast! I wish we could see all the angels and archangels singing and praising God together with us! Holy, holy, holy is the Lord!

Jesus gift is His holy presence in our midst. The feast. His holiness is the source of all life, of all good, of all wisdom and wellbeing, the highest mystery. He teaches us, He is present, He attends to all our needs, not just to spiritual, but to emotional, to social, to physical, to all of them.

That's His gift to you. He is such a joyous Giver, He rejoices when we receive, and He is happy to give more and more to everyone who desires His goodness. And He is so patient Giver. He loves your first. He comes to you, He waits for you, He rejoices being with you.

And we, what about us? What can we do? We can rejoice as did "all the people at all the glorious things that were done by him." Receive and Rejoice!

Amen.