

## “Let’s go hunting!” Mark 2:23-3:6

“One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying 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, in the time of Abiathar the 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 with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with 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 Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Let’s go hunting! Shall we? You may wonder what I mean with this? What hunting, pastor, what are you talking about? Trust me, this is going to be fun! But what are we going to be hunting? And the answer is – our idols. Yes, our idols.

Because today’s Gospel reading from Mark gives us great resources for this hunting. It shows how idols enslave us, what they do to us, but it also reveals to us the best antidote against idolatry that there is. This is what we will do today.

**First**, we will learn from those two incidents how idols fool us. **Second**, we will go hunting after our idols. It’s going to be fun. Maybe. Possibly. But probably not. **Third**, we will rejoice in the best possible antidote to idolatry that is made available to us.

**First, how do idols fool us?** Let’s see what happened. In the first incident **“one Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath.”** See, Jesus, they are breaking the law!

In the second incident, again on Sabbath the Pharisees **“watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.”** Now the Pharisees were already watching what Jesus will do.

How does this show how our idols fool us? Here it was about the keeping of the Sabbath. What was that about? About the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment. When God Yahweh led His chosen people out of Egypt, He instructed them how to live so that all the nations would look at them and wonder: **“Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him.”** (Deuteronomy. 4:6-7)

Part of that instruction which we know as the 10 Commandments, was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment, **“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.”** (Deut. 5:12) This day was God’s gift to His people.

This was supposed to be the day of rest, both physically and also spiritually. They were to remember and meditate upon God’s great works in creation and also on His mighty acts of salvation as He led them out of Egypt. What a beautiful gift!

God, the Creator of time, set aside for them one day every week, so that His people could rest, be restored, renewed in body and spirit, filled with gratitude, trust and hope as they spend that day in fellowship with their God, the Creator and their Redeemer. Wonderful!

But what had happened? And this is where we see how idols operate; they parasitise on something good. They find some beautiful gift of God, a good gift, and they use that gift to distract us from the Giver of every good gift.

They make the gift more important than the Giver. They convince us to care more about the gift than the One who gave it to us. This is what had happened with the Pharisees. The day of rest, the Sabbath, was a beautiful gift of God.

But as time went on, they gradually began to focus more and more on how to properly observe that day, not anymore on who gave them this gift and why it was given to them; to rest and enjoy fellowship with their God. By Jesus’ time there were 39 groups [!] of different activities that were listed as unlawful to be engaged in on Sabbath.

The observance of the Sabbath had gradually become their idol. There were actually no Biblical prohibitions against what the disciples did, or what Jesus did in the synagogue, only human made rules. The Inventor and the Giver of Sabbath had come to them, but they were blinded by their idolatry: “Watch this Jesus, lest He breaks our rules!” This is how idols operate, they take good gifts of God and either twist our perception about them, or make them more important than the Giver Himself.

This reading also shows how we can know when our idols are exposed? We get angry! O, yes, we do! We can’t exactly find Biblical support to justify our idolatry, so instead we get angry if someone dares to question something that has become so valuable to us.

It was ironic with the Pharisees. They were so upset about Jesus breaking their rules, that they didn’t see that the Lord of Life had begun His work of restoration of His creation, bringing healing and life. Instead, they plotted... how to destroy Jesus! That’s how idols fool us.

**Now, let’s go hunting! Let’s go after our idols.** If we succeed, this will hurt. I hope we succeed. Shall we? Let’s begin with our Sabbath. Our Triune God has given to us an amazing gift, the gift of His presence among us, where He blesses us as nowhere else.

We call it the Divine Service. Why? Because that is where the Triune God gathers us to be among us and to bless us, to bestow upon us His divine gifts. That is here where He calls us to repentance and delivers to us the gift of good conscience by forgiving us all our sin. He speaks loud and clear: “I forgive you all your sins! I do!”

It is here where He speaks to us His Law and His Gospel, reveals His will for our lives, and speaks to us His undeserved grace, His faithfulness, where He reveals His kind Fatherly heart. It is here where He has promised to hear our prayers.

It is here where He welcomes us into His family and where He feeds us forgiveness, life and salvation in His Holy Meal. It is here where He blesses us as nowhere else. Wonderful, amazing gifts of God... and such a fruitful soil for idols to prey on us.

How do they do that? Twisting our 'why', and 'how', and 'when' and 'where'. What does that mean? It's quite simple. First, twisting our 'why'. The Divine Service delivers all these gifts of God, but we can easily imagine that by being here we do something good for God, or do something that makes us better than others. "If I attend the Divine Service, I have done my part." Thus, we can easily turn the attendance of the Divine Service into our good work.

We should examine ourselves, why do we worship; is it to respond to God's invitation, to receive His most precious gifts, to be equipped for the Great Mission, to support our fellow saints, or is it about something else – just an old habit, a good work?

How do idols twist our 'how'? Yes, the Lord of the Church has instructed us about the Divine Service, about the gifts He delivers here for us, but He hasn't exactly prescribed the Divine Service in all details. But we can easily get zealous about one or another form of worship, our focus being misplaced from God's gifts, to how we worship.

We should examine ourselves; how do we organize our worship, do we consider how to follow God's instructions, how to better deliver and receive His gifts, or is it about our preferences, traditions, the way things were always done, or something like that?

There are many things that Christian community has introduced – sacred architecture, sacred art, sacred music, the Church's year with multiple festivals, readings, colours, candles, and so on, many good things. But let them not become more important than the Lord of the Church who invites us into His presence!

What about 'when' and 'where'? How are they twisted? The Father invites us, sure, but He doesn't instruct us to gather at a certain day or time or place. He gives us freedom, to help us to use His gifts wisely. Surely, for the sake of order and uniformity the Church has to great extent settled on Sunday as the day when we worship. If the Lord has so willed, a congregation may also have their own place to celebrate the Divine Service.

But we should examine ourselves, is the time or place where we worship chosen to be more faithful to the Lord, to be more faithful in our ministry to our members and to our mission to the world, the best way to use what is entrusted to us, or other criteria are more important? Such as – this is what suits me, that's how it was always done, this is what I prefer. Is Jesus in the centre when we consider those matters, or something else?

Once we go hunting for idols, we could go even one step further. Jesus surely is the Lord of the Sabbath, but He is so much more. As we confess every time we meet, He is our Lord, meaning He is the Lord over every day and every minute of our lives, and He is the Lord of every aspect of our lives. He is the Lord and the Giver of every good gift that we have, we are His own.

Now, this is not controversial, but what does this mean practically? That we should examine ourselves the same way we reflected on our Sabbath day; do we do everything with Jesus in the centre of our lives, trying to please Him, gladly listening to His instructions, inquiring for His will, presenting ourselves to Him as living sacrifices, or not?

What about our time? All of it belongs to our God, but do we have time for Him? What about our money? All of it belongs to our God. How could it be that in Australia, one of the richest countries, more and more congregations can't afford pastors?

We have the largest houses in the world, we are among the most affluent countries in the world, but unless we have 150 members in our congregations, we can't afford pastors? Isn't that puzzling? What about our lives? Every minute belongs to the Lord. But do we plan our lives with Jesus in the centre, considering both how to keep our faith till the end of lives and also how to organize our lives keeping focus on God's purposes, not on our pleasures?

See, all the good gifts of God, and it happens so naturally that some of them become for us more important than our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God that He keeps speaking to us and revealing our idols, so we can hunt them and turn to Jesus and be restored!

**Finally, the third point, about the best antidote against idolatry.** How can we resist these continuous distractions? The antidote is not something, it is someone. Yes, the same One we read about. The Son of Man, the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ.

But how does He serve as an antidote that would help us not to get distracted and fooled by idols? It is very simple. Because what He offers is so much better, so much more beautiful. We just need to be reminded about it constantly.

Yes, our God expects our attention, our loyalty, our obedience, everything. But... look at His attitude towards us, look at His loyalty to us, look at what He does for us. The Eternal Son left His divine glory to assume human existence. The Creator of everything became a creature. And what did He do with His life?

Yes, He lived it in service to us. He laid it down in service to us. And now He lives and reigns as the Risen Lord, and He does it for us, interceding for the Father, sending His Spirit to us, walking with us even in the darkest moments of our lives, He is with us, patiently serving, calling, protecting, guiding us towards that day when we will see Him as He is.

Even more, He knows how we are fooled into idolatry, how we misplace our trust and love something else more than Him, yet He doesn't give up on us when we are weak and have fallen prey, He comes to rescue us, often from ourselves. So, don't be angry, instead, be free!

So, yes, our Triune God is not only the Giver of every good gift in your life, your very life including, He also lives for you. There is nothing and no one more beautiful, more lovable, more desirable, more adorable, more praiseworthy than our Lord Jesus Christ. Your God!

It's Him who has brought you here, it's Him who will bring you to be with Him forever, if only we let Him. Rejoice and be grateful, and cling to our divine antidote, Jesus.

Amen.