

What will people think? Luke 14: 1-6 (1-14)

I grew up in a wonderful Christian home. Along with five other couples, and with the blessing of the Bishop of Leicester, my parents planted a church in a rapidly expanding residential area, a church which started in my parents' home and has since grown into a large and thriving Independent Free Church.

However, while I cannot overemphasise the benefits of growing up in a strong Christian home, there were a couple of, how shall I put it... drawbacks, the chief of which was the question that popped up with tedious regularity, "What will people think?"

This question seemed to embrace all manner of issues, ranging from the length of my hair, through the clothes that I wore and the places I went, right through to what we did on Sunday. Now remember, this is pre-August 1994 when the Sunday trading laws changed so the law was very much on my parents' side! But it wasn't so much the restrictions that bothered me, it was the inconsistencies. We were not allowed to buy anything on Sunday because, "What would people think?" unless we were away on holiday when we could buy ice creams, fish and chips, etc. We were not allowed to watch television on Sunday because, "What would people think?" unless there was an Apollo moon landing. We were allowed to take the dog to the park and throw balls for it but woe betide you if you started kicking the ball around because that would be playing football on the sabbath and, "What would people think?" We were not allowed to read Sunday's paper because it made others work on the sabbath, irrespective of the fact that Sunday's paper was printed on Saturday but reading Monday's paper, which was printed on Sunday, was alright – presumably the "people who think" hadn't made that connection!

And "What would people think?" was the position that Jesus found Himself in when he arrived at the Pharisees' house. The opening verse tells us,

...they watched Him closely:

Now the Bible doesn't explicitly tell us that this invitation was a trap, the reader is left in no doubt that it was. Why else would the leader of a group of the most religious men in the country invite a man to a banquet who had a disease which could potentially make them ceremonially unclean. And the man is not just there, we are told he is right in front of Jesus.

Jesus' opening question indicates that He knows the hearts of these men, He knows that this is a trap and so He simply asks, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath or not?" With this simple closed question, He turns the tables on them and they are caught in a trap with no way out. Their interpretation of the sabbath laws prevented doing of almost everything on the sabbath but they also know that God blessed the sabbath and therefore to prevent the doing of good deeds on that day would run counter to that blessing. You really would have thought that the Pharisees would have learned that they could not outmanoeuvre Jesus – Mark tells us that right at the start

of His ministry, at the time He was calling the disciples, Jesus had dealt with the issues of sabbath laws, so, verse 4 tells us,

...they kept silent:

and so does the man with dropsy. He does not even ask to be healed, perhaps out of fear of the watching Pharisees who would doubtless then accuse him of inciting Jesus to break their interpretation of the sabbath laws. But again Jesus knows his heart and his desire to be well again so Jesus simply takes him and heals him and sends him away. He does not want this man to be caught in the ensuing crossfire between Him and the Pharisees. You see Jesus is not concerned about, "what will people think?" even if doing this good deed might give ammunition to the Pharisees to harm Him; He is simply concerned about doing good.

The Pharisees keep silent because they know that Jesus will give this man something they don't have – compassion leading to healing. Their hearts have become closed to the man, they don't actually want him to be healed for his welfare, they see him only as a tool to trap Jesus. Do we desire good for everyone? A sign that our hearts are becoming hardened to the Lord, like the Pharisees, is when we begrudge the good that befalls others or even wish others harm.

The message of this whole incident can be summed up in just five words - Keep your eyes on Jesus:

In this Gospel passage, the Pharisees, the man suffering from dropsy and presumably everyone else in the room, servants, other guests, disciples, keep their eyes on Jesus, but with differing hearts.

The Pharisees keep their eyes on Jesus with anger that they have been outmanoeuvred and a scepticism that will not be overcome by any miracle, even the one that just been performed right in front of their eyes! In fact, if you read the next three chapters they are full of the Pharisees trying to trick Jesus.

The man with dropsy keeps his eyes on Jesus with an expectation that he might receive something that only Jesus can give him, and as we see, Jesus will not be outdone in generosity. We don't know what becomes of this man. We can only imagine the great testimony he gives to all about Jesus and how he cured him, even under the scrutiny of the Pharisees.

So, in conclusion, as Christians people *are* looking at us and so the question I was brought up with, "What will people think?" is a very valid one. However, I would suggest that what they think depends on where our hearts are and where our hearts are depends on where we are looking.

Like the Pharisees, do we look to the thing that provides order – the law (whatever our version of the law is) – rather than embrace the unpredictable and chaotic people the law was meant to serve. Obeying the letter of the law is far easier than welcoming all manner of people, following the rules is far tidier than improvising for the sake of love,

and judging others for their failures is far more satisfying than forgiving them and receiving, in return, forgiveness when we fall short.

People won't think badly of us for buying newspapers or ice creams on Sunday or playing football in the park, but they will be looking at us to see if our hearts are full of acceptance, love and compassion...and if we remember that we have all failed in the sight of God and been forgiven, it's far easier to show grace and mercy to others. So today, may God give us all the strength and wisdom to live out our faith in such a way that, as Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, people will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

Amen