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Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. As I record this podcast, we are in the month of March and the weather is just beginning to improve now after a couple of really torrid months with storms and rain and dark days and more rain, cold temperatures and even more rain. In the UK, it's been a really tough few months and there's been a lot of flooding around the country and people really badly affected by that. And I think everybody I talk to at the moment is looking forward to some warmer weather, uh, perhaps getting a holiday over the Easter period to recharge our batteries. And we all need a break from the routine of life, don't we? And holidays are something to look forward to. But it's also good to stop all our activities and rushing around on a more regular basis, uh, not just during holiday periods, so that we can regularly change the pace of life and the rhythm of our spiritual lives for a while and spend more time thinking and praying rather than doing. It's what we might call Sabbath rest.

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And I want to think about what the Sabbath is in this podcast and how we can develop a spiritual discipline of taking Sabbath rest because I think it's one of the most misunderstood parts of the Christian life. And it's far too important for us not to get it right. And to do that, we're going to think about a passage from Mark's gospel from Mark chapter two verses 23 to 28 in which Jesus is out for a walk with his disciples through the cornfields and the conversation turns to what the Sabbath is all about. Now, as I say, I think the idea of the Sabbath is one of the most misunderstood throughout the history of the church. There's so much confusion about what the Sabbath is and what should or shouldn't be done on it. Throughout history, most Christians have taken the Sabbath to mean Sunday.

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And so Sunday has traditionally become known as a day of rest. And we all know the debates around whether or not shops should open on a Sunday or whether people should work on a Sunday. Um, but I'm not convinced that that's particularly good theology because Sunday is not the Sabbath and it never has been. And it's not what the early church following Jesus believed Sabbath to be. So we need to get our heads around this idea of what the Sabbath is so that we can then know how to observe it properly. So let's think about the setting for this story as Mark tells it in his gospel, Mark chapter two verse 23. The story begins like this. "One Sabbath, Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck ears of grain and the Pharisee said to them, 'Look, why are they doing something like this on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?'"

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Now, this may not seem like too big a deal, but actually the Pharisees were making a really serious accusation here. Listen to Exodus 31 verse 14 from the Old Testament. It says, "Observe the Sabbath because it's holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death". So this is a really serious charge. This was literally a matter of life and death for the disciples. If Jesus was not going to obey Sabbath rules, under the law he deserved to die. It appeared that Jesus was desecrating Jewish law by behaving as he did. So how did Jesus then respond to this charge? Well, to be honest, he responds in a completely bizarre way. The response he gives is both historically inaccurate and actually has nothing to do with the Sabbath. Jesus draws on the story of David and his men recorded in 1 Samuel 21.

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Um, and before we look at the story itself, there's two things to note here. Firstly, the story of what happened with David in 1 Samuel 21 is not recorded as having happened on the Sabbath. So it doesn't really, uh, illuminate the point that Jesus is wanting to make about the Sabbath. Jesus, it seems in this story, is not really wanting to teach anything about the nature of the Sabbath. Secondly, Jesus actually gets his history wrong here in verse 26. He says that Abiathar was High Priest, but he wasn't. It was actually Ahimelech at the time. But, uh, that's by the by. Um, in the story, David is fleeing from Saul and he arrives at the city and he comes to Ahimelech and asks him for bread for his men to eat. But Ahimelech has only got consecrated bread for the worship.

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And according to Leviticus 24, verse nine, only priests could eat that. But nevertheless, Ahimelech sees David and the men that are with him are in real need. So he gives them that bread to eat anyway. And as a result, Ahimelech and his family are all killed by Saul. But Abiathar escaped and joined up with David later on. It's a really strange response from Jesus because actually, um, he refuses to be drawn by the, by the Pharisees into a debate about the Sabbath as such. But instead he uses it as an opportunity to critique the institutionalized form of faith that the Pharisees represented. It seems to me that Jesus is giving an example of the fact that there are times and there are occasions when even the High Priest himself would step outside of the tradition in order to show compassion and meet the real needs of others. And if the High Priest was happy to do that, then it's clear that law and tradition are there as a framework for faith but should never become our masters. Tradition, church tradition, is useful if it informs us how to meet the needs of others with compassion. But tradition is not useful to us anymore, it ceases to be useful, when we end up serving that tradition rather than acting out of love towards others. Tradition ceases to be useful when we don't respond out of compassion for fear of going against what has been the pattern of doing church over the years.

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So Jesus is using this encounter with the Pharisees as an opportunity to help people think through their attitude towards inherited traditions. He's not saying that tradition should be overturned or abandoned, but only that we are not to become slaves to it. Tradition is there as a guide. It's a point of information to help us make appropriate decisions in our worship of God, in our service of other people, and really to keep us within the bounds of orthodoxy. But tradition is not our master. Love is our master, and the demands of love outweigh the demands of tradition at every turn. As Jesus says in verse 27, "the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath". And then he finishes off with the slightly ambiguous comment in verse 28, "So the son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath". Now, there are two completely different ways of interpreting this comment, and I think that both of them are actually okay.

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Both of them are right. For some people, the son of man referred to here is Jesus himself. Uh, Jesus we know is the second person of the Trinity who has all authority as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And as such, he has Lordship even over the Sabbath. Now, that's a perfectly plausible interpretation. It's certainly one that, um, most of our English versions of the Bible take because they usually use capital

letters for the phrase, Son of Man to clearly make the link with Jesus. But there is an equally plausible alternative interpretation if we don't use capital letters, if we don't use a capital S and a capital M for son of man. Because the phrase 'son of man' was a common Jewish phrase to mean 'a human being'. It was a general term that could also be applied to ordinary people. So in that sense, it may be that Jesus is saying that all of us are masters over the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being master over us. Now this makes perfect sense as an interpretation, particularly in the light of verse 27, "the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath". So Jesus is saying that the Sabbath is here to serve us. We are not here to slavishly be tied to rules and regulations about what we can and can't do on the Sabbath.

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So what is the Sabbath and if it's not a Sunday, how does it differ from a Sunday? Well, it's actually quite simple. The Sabbath is and always has been Saturday and Sunday is most properly known as 'the Lord's Day'. So what's the difference? Well, the Sabbath was a gift from God so that people could stop, pause, and take time out and look back to all God's blessings upon them in the past. And that was at the heart of Jewish spirituality and our Jewish heritage as Christians, this moment where we stop and we look back in remembrance of God's blessings on us is really important. If we don't take time to look back and remember God's hand on our lives in the past, we'll find it harder to see his work in our lives in the present day. So the Sabbath is about looking back and remembering. But Sunday has a completely different reason for existing from a Christian perspective.

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Sunday is actually about us stopping, pausing and taking time out to look forwards, not backwards. Sunday is the day when we look forward in time to when Christ will return and all things will come to their conclusion in the plans of God. And that's why I think it's so important to take Holy Communion, within my tradition, every Sunday. Uh, it may be slightly different in your own tradition, but I think it's very important for us to take Holy Communion on a regular basis because it's the liturgical act of looking forward to the gift of salvation that is made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist, Holy Communion, is the great liturgical gift we have to anticipate the future in the light of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. So on the Sabbath, we stop and we look back with remembrance and thanksgiving, and on a Sunday we stop and we look forward in anticipation of Christ's return.

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Now these are two different days and they have two different purposes. And as Christians, we need both. We need both the Sabbath, the time to look back, and we need Sunday, the time to look forward. So Sabbath rest then is about much more than just having a day off. It's actually immaterial as to where the shops are open or we watch TV or not. Sabbath rest is engaging with the act of looking back and remembering God's activity in our lives and giving thanks for that. So of course then Sabbath is not something that just happens once a week on a Saturday. We should be taking Sabbath moments every single day of our lives, times when we just stop for a few minutes during the middle of the day, during the end of the working day, at the beginning of the day, or any other point during the day. Just taking time to stop and pause and focus on God and remember his grace towards us. Now, if we took Sabbath moments throughout our day, every day, how much would our lives improve? How much would our stress levels be reduced? How much would our relationships being enhanced, and our perspective would be made so much clearer? If we take Sabbath moments every single day, punctuated throughout

the day, to stop and look back and remember God's blessings on us, then we will be transformed as people and our spiritual disciplines will grow so much deeper.

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So in this passage, then, Jesus reminds us that Sabbath is important, but it's not important in the way that the Pharisees thought it was. The Sabbath is not one day a week on which we have to follow certain rules and regulations; a day on which we're not allowed to watch TV or we're not allowed to undertake certain activities. The Sabbath is actually about an experience of God. The Sabbath is about the remembrance of God. And we should be seeking Sabbath moments on a daily basis, many times a day, as well as one full day a week. And how much stronger would the church be if we had more Christians who took the Sabbath seriously? How much stronger our own faith would be if we took Sabbath moments seriously. So perhaps today we might all recommit ourselves to being Sabbath Christians, Sabbath Christians who pause on a regular basis throughout the day, throughout the week, to look back and remember God's grace and activity in our lives and then in the light of our Sabbath remembrances to commit ourselves afresh daily, to worship him for his goodness and to serve him in the world.

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So every day, every moment of every day, can be a Sabbath if you choose for it to be. And the more we choose to Sabbath with God, the more we choose to pause from our busy-ness and look back in remembrance to God's goodness for us, then the more we will know him in our lives. So wherever you are today and whatever you're doing in the midst of all your busy-ness, I hope that you will be able to build in some Sabbath moments; to stop, to pause, to look back and remember God's goodness to you. And then to commit yourself really to increasingly build up a robust Sabbath spirituality across your whole life. Sabbath is for looking back and remembering. Sunday is for looking forward and anticipating Christ's return. And if we can get that balance between Sabbath and Sunday into our lives, how much stronger will our faith be and how much more will that spiritual discipline of coming to know and experience and remember God, how much more will that transform who we are as children of God? So it's been good to be back with you again today. I do hope you have a great day, full of Sabbath remembrance. And thank you for listening to this podcast. If you've got any questions, any comments, it's always good to hear from you. I love it when you contact me, steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. And please do subscribe to these podcasts, tell other people about them as well so we can continue to grow as a community of learners together. So wherever you are, whatever you're doing today,

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I hope you have a great day. Bye.