

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jan 21st 2015

The vague they at the beginning of the gospel reading is clarified at the end of the passage, as the Pharisees took counsel with the Herodians. It looks like the Herodians were not present in the synagogue, since the Pharisees had to go out to take counsel with them. These they are asked a question: Is it permitted to do good on the Sabbath...? But they remained silent. Their silence is surprising, since they had confronted Jesus in the past, and so it smacks of passive aggressiveness. Their real reaction, their anger, explodes at the end of the episode, as they take counsel to put Jesus to death.

Is it permitted...? Permitted speaks of norms and rules. In yesterday's gospel reading Jesus asserted that rules (Sabbath) are for people, not people for the rules (Sabbath). For one thing, they themselves would on the Sabbath untie an ox to water it and would pull a sheep from a well.

Rules have the potential of bringing out two opposite reactions:

(a) Absolute absolutism: all rules are absolutes. The Sabbath is the Sabbath. No exceptions, no ifs or buts.

(b) Absolute relativism: no rule deserves being taken seriously. A German Jesuit friend once told me a story meant to illustrate precisely this attitude: a British dad has taken his son to the train station to send him to college and, before the son boards the train, his dad gives him one last piece of advice: Never ride a principle to death... not even this one. Absolute relativism.

Norms/rules are simply creatures, they are not God. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola we are offered guidelines for the use of creatures: use them to the extent that they help you to achieve the purpose for which we were created and abstain from using them to the extent that they hinder you from achieving that purpose. That is an appropriate guideline.

God is the only real absolute. Our articulations of God's will are not such.

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