SECOND SUNDAY after PENTECOST 3 June 2018 Mark 3. 1-6

70 years ago, after Sunday church, my Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist Adelaide became deadly dull. Everything was quaintly quiet.

There were no shops open, no sport, no work, few cars. My sister was told she mustn’t play with her hoop out the front as it was Sunday; she should go to the back garden. *“Why?”* piped the pert miss, *isn’t it Sunday in the back garden?”*

Since then, Sunday’s shared culture of rest and relaxation, the protected time for families to spend together, has slipped away. Have we forgotten why it was there? It is a day we should pause to slow down from the tyranny of the treadmill and give time to enrich by remembrance other people both living and dead.

In the Nazareth synagogue on the day of Sabbath rest, self-consciously, the man with the embarrassing withered hand, remained unseen by all folk except Jesus, because the Law stated he could not be cured on the Sabbath, but he should not have been in synagogue. Even an accidental brush against another worshipper would spill his physical uncleanness onto them.

His handicap may have been rheumatoid arthritis or the result of a working accident (Luke mentions the afflicted member was his right or working hand). If discovered, at best he would be thrown out; at worst, he would be stoned.

At Sunday worship, e we ever like the maimed man? “I’m not feeling so chipper, I’ll just sneak in at the back and hope to be left alone, and, if that damn fool Walter guffaws about giving a sign of peace to a neighbour, I’ll up and leave.” Jesus determined to expose the man’s brokenness to the congregation’s uncaring hearts.

Where helping is concerned there can be no forbidden time. It is always now. Jesus asked the self-appointed guardians of outworn tradition*, “on the Sabbath, is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”*

The sufferer was in no danger of death, but, Jesus thought it was not good enough to say *“Come back tomorrow. I’ll look after you then.”* Jesus knew that he was on a collision course with his enemy no matter what he did. The religious Mafia were only concerned with catching Jesus out, if he broke their rules.

Jesus looked at the religious whiners with anger. Anger seems to come coded in the DNA of our own “terrible twos.” A sudden throwdown in Aldi. *“You never buy me Wagonwheels. I hate you!”*

Jesus had no temper tantrums, but he could be angry, furious at the rock hard hearts of the religious zealots. He fumed with righteous anger when they would not see that the Law must be subservient to an individual’s pressing need.

I said *pressing*: at Cabrini, I can tell a farmer patient. Shaking his hand is like being crunched by a lobster, from the thick build-up of callouses on his palms. The Pharisees read God’s word with a calloused heart, a hard crust that cannot be unclasped and enlarged.

Jesus’ anger was ***not*** sudden, explosive road-rage nor uncontrolled football rage that gets you kicked out of Etihad. The medical term for a volcanic Vesuvius is IED, “Intermittent Explosive Disorder.” It is sinisterly ironic that the present booby-traps in Iraq are also called IED, “Improvised Explosive Device.” **…** Both IED’s can cause a world of hurt for others in our broken society.

Years ago, my hungry Missus sent me across to Georgios’ for a pizza. She wanted half some sort of dead fish; my half was Hawaiian. An0ther fellow had ordered before me. But my pizza came first. He exploded “I was *here first. Why is he getting his before me?”* He was blind with sudden rage and yelled at the serving lass’s words I must not use in holy church, and stormed out shouting *“You can keep your stupid pizza.”* I asked the lass was she OK, and she said, “I said to myself, *“He’s just a jerk!”* Then she smiled and added, *“And now we get to eat his pizza.”*

In the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which has never gained admission to the New Testament, the man was a stone mason, who cried *Give me back my health so that I shall not need to beg in shame.”* Jesus had asked the Pharisees, whose only concern was upholding the minutiae their rules, *“was it lawful on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”* Full well, he knew that, if he saved the man, he could be killed. Sure enough, at the end of worship, the two-faced villains held a court (surely a ‘work,’) with their usual enemies, to conspire to entrap Jesus. Their Sabbath Law outlawed healing but permitted plotting someone’s death. That’s just about as bad a Sabbath violation gets.

Jesus was angry because they would not let their Sabbath-keeping faith be stretched beyond their narrow rules in God’s loving direction.

If they had troubled to read their prophets, they may have heard Isaiah urge *“Enlarge the place of your tent. Stretch out the curtains of your dwelling. Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes”* [Isaiah 54.2]. If we seek first the Kingdom of God, God will stretch us into what he has designed for us, to be a blessing for others.

Jesus then called to the man “Come forward.” He wished to show the hearers that this injured man was a man of worth, that he should be loved and respected. Do we ever give someone the feeling that they are not wanted, as they may make us uneasy? We judge by outward appearance and not by the inward beauty: think of the story of the power of growing friendship and regenerative love of the deformed artist, Philip Rhayader with Fritha in Gallico’s “The Snow Goose.”

Jesus could have waited until the service ended on Sabbath morn to effect a quiet one-on-one cure. But he wished to evoke sympathy for the stricken man, to show the closed minds that they should be honoured by the presence of the injured would-be working man, who was not in the least unclean.

Jesus’ act was quite public-in-your-face. He was up against an absolutely immovable frame of mind. But, he did not truly break the Sabbath work ban. He did no war dance, like the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. He called down no fire from on high. He did not even touch the sufferer. He simply said “S*tretch out your hand,”* hardly a work. But the nasties would not allow their small minds to stretch at all.

At his word, blood flowed into deformed fingers, nerves gained suppleness, fingers uncoiled, and his hand opened like a reviving flower. Jesus gave the man back his health, his work and his self-respect.

Is our relationship with this church family in any way withered? Sapped dry with loss of energy to join in more fully? Are our lives wilting through bad life choices, which we just won’t stretch out to work on and be made whole? Our hands should reach out in intercessory prayer. Are they clawed tight by tawdry world cares?

Jesus stands in our synagogue to stretch our faith. Do we respond with all kinds of mental tug-of-wars because we don’t want him to stretch us to meet the challenges and the setbacks ahead? If we don’t allow him to stretch us, we will never be what he created us for. Be of good cheer; when he bends us he won’t break us; when he stretches us, he won’t snap us. His promise from Isaiah is *“a bruised reed, he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench”* [Isaiah 42.3].

Today, we are so blessed. We are here to stretch out our withered hands in supplication. We will take his sacrament of healing grace and new life to let refreshing strength and wholeness pour into our souls, to any part of our being that is suffering from a season of dryness. The victory is **in** our stretching, because our life with God is lived **in the stretch**.

Thank you for your patience, today. Amen.