

# Picking a fight: Mark 3.1-19

*Pilgrims in the crowded streets of Jerusalem ...*



A small proportion of the timetable of the House of Commons is opposition time. Generally, the opposition use this time to hold votes on issues that will embarrass the government or, even better, tempt government MP's to vote against their government. These votes almost never translate into legislation. They are there to score political points.

Sometimes governments do this too. They have a vote about something not because it is an important issue, but because they know it is an issue that creates difficulties for their opponents.

The normal response to these provocations is to abstain. But abstention can come with a political cost also. If you abstain, come election time, your opponent may put out a leaflet to say you abstained on an issue that on the face of it seems eminently worthy of support.

Andy Burnham, for example, abstained in just such a vote in 2015, in this case a government bill to lower the household benefit welfare cap. It severely undermined his campaign to replace Ed Miliband as Labour leader. After the vote, Burnham said, “It is quite clear that this is a party now that is crying out for leadership and that is what I have shown in recent days.” He was soon to find out that most of his party members didn’t agree. There is danger in abstaining. You look indecisive and cowardly.

Is this really relevant to the story of Jesus and his opponents, the Pharisees?

Yes it is.

In Mark’s Gospel, the healing ministry of Jesus immediately attracts hostility from the Pharisees. And so, they ask out loud questions that they think will be difficult for Jesus to answer. All these questions are designed to split the followers of Jesus and make them doubt him. It is not clear that these questions are questions that matter particularly to the people of Galilee.

For example, today’s account of the confrontation in the synagogue over sabbath observance was preceded by an account of the fishermen/disciples failing to maintain sabbath discipline by plucking the heads of grain as they walked through a corn field. So, we are left wondering, how big an issue was sabbath observance for the people thronging to see Jesus and his miraculous healing?

But when the man with the withered hand came to the synagogue, the Pharisees thought this was a chance to put Jesus on the spot. Either he would have to refuse to heal the man out of respect for the sabbath and disappoint the crowd. Or he would go ahead with the healing and thereby raise questions in the minds of devout Jews about his theological soundness. Or even better, he would fail to act decisively and duck the whole thing.

But Jesus turns the tables on his opponents. He invites the man with the withered hand to come forward demonstrating that he wants everybody to see what will happen. (He doesn’t, for example, whisper to the man, ‘Can I see you afterwards?’) He then poses the question to his opponents; ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ The Pharisees are silent. Whatever answer they give creates problems for them. Either they lose their whole argument about sabbath observance or they look very cruel in front of a man who is suffering. So they abstain.

And then Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. Jesus doesn’t abstain. He acts decisively. He does not avoid conflict but enters into it.

There are two other things to note.

First of all, once again, Mark tells us about the emotions Jesus feels. When Jesus healed the leper, we are told he was ‘moved with pity’ (Mark 1:41). With the Pharisees who remain silent in the face of the suffering of the man with the withered hand we are told Jesus looked at them with anger because he was grieved at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). We see hear the incarnation of the wrath of God; anger that is rooted in love.

Secondly, we are told that at the end of this confrontation that ‘the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.’ (Mark 3:6). Previously they had been content to snipe from the edges. Now the Pharisees, having lost face in a public confrontation, decided to ally themselves with the Herodians, to bring about the downfall of Jesus. So, this incident triggers the events that lead eventually to the cross.

What will the disciples have made of all this? What had they got themselves into?

They had followed Jesus from town to town watching as he healed the sick. Crowds of people had joined them everywhere they went. There had been a few nay-sayers, sure, but Jesus seemed to know how to shrug them off. But now their man had picked a public fight. They had seen him express anger. The other lot had walked out angry and upset.

And what do we make of this? Are we prepared to follow a Jesus who picks a fight, who gets angry, who upsets people who have the power to cause you real problems? Have we been hoping we are following a Jesus who knows when to abstain?

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