Views from the Pews – Them's the rules

Matthew 12 1-14 is just one example of a familiar event in Jesus' ministry. A group (usually labelled 'Pharisees' by Gospel writers) pop up and say; 'You can't do that on the Sabbath – it's against the Rules' .

Look closely at Jesus' response in those two cases. He is far more familiar with what the Pharisees called 'the Rules' than they themselves, knew the context, and deftly turns the argument back. Jesus was familiar with 'the Rules' and would have known how easy it was for Rules to be used by the influential to control the behaviour of the not-so-influential. He was forever testing 'the Rules' against God's actual bottom lines. He knew which Rules were in fact human constructs that did not measure up.

Of course we need rules. Because the rules around underground coalmining are often broken when enforcement is out of sight, our West Coast has paid a heavy price. And our roads need rules. So does the Church.

But rules need careful scrutiny, and frequent revision. What seems good and right in one Century looks ridiculous in another. Some will remember when hats in church were obligatory for women but forbidden for men. For whom were the rules written? For God? Or for a particular hierarchy at a given time which has now passed? How do the rules stack up against Christ's two Great Commandments? If in doubt we must revisit them.

Those who doubt the legality of appointing a female Archbishop of Canterbury cite 'the Rules' in support. We could do worse than to tease out what these Rules really are and what they really say. Are they honest but outmoded misunderstandings? Are they reflections of social codes that have not stood the test of time? What did Jesus actually say about the role of women in society? Even better, what did he do with and for women? A critical approach is called for, even to the point of appearing disruptive. The Pharisees disliked disruption – we are not even half way through this Gospel and Matthew has them plotting 'to do away with Him'.

And it may not be stretching things too far to argue that Matthew himself would have supported a female Archbishop. Look at Chapter 11 2-6 which contains Jesus' charge to John's own disciples. What better qualification for an Archbishop than she made the lame walk and the blind see?

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