

Trinity I, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018.

***The Sabbath***  
**(Deuteronomy 3:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6)**

First, a health warning. Be very suspicious of Gospel stories which suggest that the typical response of a Jewish synagogue leader to a miraculous healing on the Sabbath would be to complain about Jesus breaching the rules. I suspect most synagogue leaders would probably have been delighted, like we would. Jews are not and were not, by and large, mean-minded, petty, legalistic and hypocritical. Stories which suggest otherwise are poison.

Warning Number Two. The point of today's Gospel reading seems to be something like this: 'Don't get so obsessed with the rules around the Sabbath that you become ridiculously uptight. If people are hungry or need healing on the Sabbath, for goodness sake feed them and heal them.' Hurrah. I suspect hardly anyone in twenty first century England is going to find that a challenging message. We are perhaps the *last* people who could be accused of taking the Sabbath too seriously. Sunday is the second busiest shopping day of the week. Many people work on Sundays and for those who don't it's often jam-packed with the things there's no time for in the rest of the week – cleaning, ironing, domestic admin, the kids' homework. This week, the blooming vicar has even gone and put a PCC meeting on a Sunday evening – and the worst thing is, I didn't even agonise much about doing so.

So we would do much better to pay attention to the Old Testament reading this morning: the book of Deuteronomy, and the fifth Commandment. Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy. Stop working and rest. Remember who you are: God's beloved people, whom he rescued out of Egypt. Relish the fact that that's the most important thing about you, that nothing you can accomplish or produce or succeed at can rival that. You are loved. Work hard by all means: work for six days, at your very best and with all your skill. But on the seventh day, rest.

And that, my friends, is one of God's ten basic principles for living. You shall not steal, you shall not kill, you shall not lie – and you shall keep the Sabbath. It is that important. If you do not keep Sabbath, you will forget who you are and what is important. You will think your life is all about effort and earning your way, about gaining your daily bread and the respect of others. And you will, quite likely, become obsessed about success and achievement and the love of money. Stop all this: keep the Sabbath.

Now like all basic principles, there's debate about precisely how you implement this one – do we all have to keep exactly the same day? Could my sabbath not be a Thursday or a Tuesday? What counts as work anyway? And that is how all those Jewish debates which are so easy to mock got started. They are not stupid questions, and each of us must arrive at our own answers. But what we can't do is pick so many holes in the commandment that it becomes just a suggestion, or even a joke. The word 'commandment' means what it says. If you want to be God's people, you've really got to do this. Keep the Sabbath.

So how then? How do we, today, work out the tension between the clear Commandment and the complicated circumstances of our individual lives? Well – two thoughts for starters.

The Commandment was for the Israelites to rest, so they'd remember who they were, that they were God's beloved children set free from Egypt. You're not a worker, you're a child of God. That is your first and deepest identity. Sabbath is about remembering that, and **renewing** it. And that is why part of Sabbath is about worship – put simply, coming to church. You are not, first, a teacher, a nurse, a financial worker, a parent, a student, or a carer. Those are good and important things, and you might be those things, but you are not them *first*: you are a beloved child of God. The most important thing about you is that God so loved you that he gave his only Son to make you full of joy, and hope, and love. And this is so regardless of your effort, your work, your success. It's the gift of Jesus, through his Cross and his Resurrection. You come to church to remember that, to renew it, to **receive it** in bread and wine. Then you go and live it out in the world.

So just to underline: the Christian Sabbath involves coming, if you possibly can, to Church. So many people say: 'ah, you don't have to go to church to be a Christian'. And we smile sweetly so as not to offend – but perhaps we should say 'really? What makes you think that?' Because that particular saying – 'you don't have to go to church to be a Christian' – is to say the least, highly debatable.

And when you have worshipped, you rest. And perhaps the best way to know what counts as rest is to ask a simple question: what's driving me? Why am I doing what I'm doing on the Sabbath – because if it is still a matter of being driven by compulsions, whether to earn a wage or to meet expectations, even my *own* expectations, it is not Sabbath. Take gardening, say. I can garden because I love it, and find it consoling and restful. To garden like that is to keep Sabbath. But to garden because I must, because the place looks a mess and the neighbours will notice and I will feel lazy – that's stress, that's compulsion, that's effort. There are six days for all that, and indeed the grass does need cut. But not this day. This day, I rest. So ask yourself honestly: what's driving you? And for this one glorious Sabbath day, vow not to be driven. This day is about you and God, and God does not do driving. Now you might say that sounds lovely but is just not realistic. What *you* do, whether its professional or household, is just so big and busy and fast that turning off for a day is simply not an option. It's a fantasy. And believe me, I know that feeling. I *know* keeping Sabbath is hard. But here's the thing. If you don't manage it, at least most weeks, if you're completely unable to shake off your compulsions and your pressures – well, then you will die. You might die physically from stress and exhaustion; you will certainly die spiritually, a withered up and shattered soul. And we need to push back: if your job, or your role, means that you can never rest, that you can never keep Sabbath – well, it needs to change. And if it can't, then perhaps you need to leave. Sabbath is *that* important.

We worship, and we rest. That's what is to keep the Sabbath, and it will help us live and work to God's praise and glory. Amen.

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