

Sabbath Rest

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2: 23-3:6

You could be forgiven for being a little confused by today's readings. It quite clearly says in the book Deuteronomy that the Jews are required to keep the Sabbath; yet Jesus breaks the Sabbath openly, unapologetically, even defiantly. When the Pharisees complain about his disciples picking ears of corn he makes a reference to the way King David behaved as if he, Jesus, were on a par with the greatest king the Jews had ever known. And even when he knows that the Pharisees are waiting to see if he will heal on the Sabbath, he confronts them, reproves them. The result is that they go away to plot what will, in the end, be his crucifixion.

This apparent breaking of the Law does not fit with other things we know about Jesus. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, straight after the beatitudes he told his hearers:

Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.
I have come not to abolish but to complete them.

Matthew 5: 17

And on his way to Jerusalem he appears on Mt Sinai with Moses and Elijah, the authors of the Law and the Prophets respectively, as if to emphasize his credentials – Jesus is one of them, Moses and Elijah. So how do we square this circle?

Perhaps it might help to go to one of Jesus's greatest interpreters – St Paul, a former Jew, who drew a distinction between the Law and the Spirit. As a Jew he had lived by the Law, he had followed the teachings of Moses, quite scrupulously as to every detail. As a Christian he lived by the Spirit, or rather by the Holy Spirit. As a Jew he had had the scriptures to give him some idea of what God wanted him to do, day in day out. As a Christian he had a personal relationship with God.

Jesus did not use that same Law-Spirit terminology, he did not use the same words as St Paul but he clearly had the same thing in mind. So, in the Sermon on the Mount he provides a number of teachings with a recurring formula as an introduction:

'you have heard it said.. but I say'

When Jesus said 'you have heard it said' he means 'it is written in the Law.' And when he then goes on to say 'but I say', in every case he sets out the ideal where the Law sets out the compromise, the practical, the concession. So:

- the Law say that we must not murder but Jesus says we must not even be angry;
- the law says we must not commit adultery but Jesus says we must not even look with lust;
- the law say we must follow the right procedure in divorce but Jesus says we must remain faithful to each other;
- the law say that revenge should be proportionate (an 'eye for an eye') but Jesus says we should not take revenge at all.

This can sound like a tightening of the law – even like a thumbscrew. But it is not. It is Jesus setting before us God's ideal for our lives. The Law made it very clear that certain minimum standards of behaviour were expected; but the Jews had made the *minimum* standard the *maximum*: if you kept the law you were OK with God. Jesus sets before us the ideal, the maximum standard. He wants his followers to live by the Spirit, and to obey the commandments, not to avoid punishment, not to earn brownie points or the approval of the religious leaders or even our neighbours but because we have got inside the commandments, we have made them our own, we obey them because we believe in them.

And when the principle of getting inside the law is applied to keeping the Sabbath it produces something quite different from the legalism that surrounded Jesus. That legalism we might lead us to conclude that whereas Jews kept the Sabbath once a week we Christians should keep every day as a Sabbath. And that would be nonsense.

So when Jesus interprets the commandment to keep the Sabbath he asks the same question he asks of every commandments: what is this designed to achieve? And the answer is simple: rest!

You shall not do any work...so that your male or female slave my rest as well as you.

Deuteronomy 5:14

The theological argument for this is that God himself rested on the seventh day. It is an extraordinary idea. God who is all-powerful, gets tired and needs a break! If God needs a break so do we.

But the theological arguments, the biblical arguments are supported by modern science. This need for the sabbath is recognized by a Christian charity, *The Mind and Soul Foundation*. Its website marked Mental Health Week last month by asking a question, 'How big a problem is stress?' The answer it gave was this:

3/4 of adults report feeling so stressed that they feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. 80% of people admitted feeling stressed at some point during a typical week, and 8% said they felt stressed all the time.

www.mindandsoulfoundation.org

The Foundation then went on to suggest five ways of dealing with stress. The first was to schedule rest:

In busy times it can feel like there just isn't time to chill out and rest - but actually it is more important than ever. Schedule rest in your diary: block it out and resist the temptation to overwrite it with jobs or chores. Remember rest isn't time when you are doing nothing: it refuels you for all the other things you do.'

The advice from 21st century mental health counsellors sounds remarkably like the law of God dating back four thousand years:

the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You must not do any work that day.

Dt 5:14 and 15

That is why Jesus had no qualms about healing on the Sabbath. He knew that this commandment was not about keeping rules, not about refraining from certain actions on one day of the week: it was about making time for rest. And he did. There were times when he got away from the crowds, sometimes alone and sometimes with his disciples; there were times when he dined out and was criticized for it.

But the spirit of legalism is never dead. In some ways it is a natural attitude for human beings to adopt: following rules and conventions is often easier than listening to God and responding with love. I remember less than forty years ago being advised not to hang my washing out on a Sunday; and I have often heard people older than me speak of how, as children, they were not allowed to play out on a Sunday. It is hard to understand why the day of rest should be the one day a week when children were not allowed to enjoy themselves!

But if legalism has always been with us we can be quite sure it is with us today. The problem is we may not recognize it. So perhaps my response to today's gospel should be to examine my own life, examine my own responses to others and ask myself the question: am I responding with an unthinking following of rules and convention? Or am I responding by listening to God and loving others?

The Christian understanding of the Sabbath may begin with rest but it does not end there. The Sabbath is associated not only with rest but with worship. We are refuelled not only by our rest but also by being with God. And in a rather roundabout way the Mind and Soul Foundation recognizes this. Scheduling rest was the first of five tips to deal with stress. The other four are also relevant to the way we worship:

2 - Learn to relax: being here on a Sunday morning is not worrying about whether we get the worship right or not. It is also about trusting God with the worries of the other six days and giving them into his hands;

3 - Be mindful: we pay attention to the present moment and enjoy it; we live neither in the past nor the future but in the present/

4 - Watch your boundaries: in this context make sure the time on Sunday morning is protected.

5 - Get outside more. I was tempted to interpret this as a suggestion that we should celebrate the Parish Mass in the churchyard! I am going to resist that temptation. But it reminded me that many years ago a member of my congregation commented that he found God as much in his garden as he did in church. 'Oh really?' I said which meant 'That's quite heretical.' Twenty five years later I find myself the same age as Gordon was then. And I find myself quite in sympathy. It's not that God is more present in the outdoors,

it is more that the outdoors can take us beyond ourselves; and beyond ourselves lies God. Perhaps each one of us needs to be aware of what takes us outside our own immediate concerns, beyond ourselves; for it is there that we might find our Sabbath rest; there that we might find God.

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