



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

28 June 2020: Matins Sermon

The Third Sunday after Trinity

Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Matthew 12:1-8

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This week a friend of mine bought a new fridge freezer and in it were instructions for 'Sabbath Mode'. I've never seen this before. When 'sabbath mode' is on it says 'some of the electronic control functions are switched off and...you no longer need to worry about indicator lamps, figures, symbols, displays, alarm messages or fans'.

'Sabbath Mode' in a fridge is a rather unusual extension of the sabbath laws instituted in the Torah, laws which wove the idea of a rhythm of activity and rest into the very weft of life for the Jewish people.

I confess to having always felt rather ambivalent about sabbath, a day set aside for rest and worship. As a child Sundays were generally pretty dull, and for most of my adult life Sundays have been a working day. My husband is an entertainer and so Sundays for him are a day for parties and events. As a member of the clergy, Sundays haven't been known for being particularly restful. So when I think of sabbath I tend to feel a little guilty. I feel as if I ought to be resting but somehow don't manage it very effectively.

Sabbath, or Shabat, means 'to rest from labour', 'to set apart as Holy'. In the Genesis poem we are told: 'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work he had done, and he rested... so God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it'.ⁱ This concept of sabbath was therefore right at the beginning of creation, and the idea of a period of rest was, and still is, fundamental to the Jewish way of life.

In Exodus, once the Israelites had been freed from years of captivity under their Egyptian oppressors God provided bread (manna) for them over six days but on the seventh day they were instructed not to leave their tents to gather food. They were to rest and sustain themselves with the provision they had saved from the abundance the day before.ⁱⁱ

This rhythm of life was then instituted in Jewish law through the ten commandments given to Moses, where the command to ‘remember the sabbath day and keep it holy’ⁱⁱⁱ was the longest and most detailed of all of the commandments. It was crucially important. The day of rest was not just for the individual but was for the entire household, which even included servants and livestock.

This rhythm of the sabbath was not just confined to the weekly pattern of living, but was extended into the rhythm of the years through the Jewish law of Shmita. This is what is described in our reading from Deuteronomy 15. A Shmita is literally translated as ‘release’ and is known as a sabbatical year. For ancient Israel the land was to be given a seven-year cycle and on the seventh year the land was to remain fallow, and all agricultural activity, including ploughing, planting, pruning and harvesting, was forbidden. Any produce that grew of its own accord during that year was deemed hefker (ownerless), not for the landowner to harvest, but left for the poor, the stranger, and the beasts of the field.

During this sabbatical year any debts incurred previously would be released, slaves would be set free, and the poor and needy would be cared for. Sabbath was for all creation. At the heart of the sabbath rhythm was a reminder to God’s people of three things.

Firstly, sabbath was a reminder of a need for faith; that provision ultimately comes from God rather than our human exertion. Secondly freedom; sabbath laws enforced a rest that was all too often was denied in the ancient world. Sabbath was a reminder to the liberated Israelites that they were no longer slaves. It was to be a symbol of freedom. Walter Brueggemann writes “Sabbath, in the first instance, is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being.”^{iv} Thirdly, sabbath was a reminder to the Israelites that they didn’t have ultimate ownership over the land, that they were essentially aliens and guests in the world, and as such should share the abundance of creation with others.

And above all of this sabbath was a day of delight, a period of time to rest and contemplate God, on all that had been and to be thankful for all that was.

We can perhaps learn much from this in our 21st Century world in which work replaces faith; where we have all the freedoms we could hope for and yet enslave ourselves to productivity; where we exhaust our land with over production yet still allow millions to go hungry; and where we struggle to stop to just enjoy and appreciate all that we have.

The first time we hear of sabbath in Jesus' life in Matthew's gospel is when he is being reprimanded for healing a man with a withered hand and for allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the sabbath. The Pharisees objected to this as being against the letter of the law. Their role was to enforce rest.

But they missed the whole point... because of course sabbath IS a time for nourishment, healing and restoration. And so it makes sense that the hungry would be fed and health would be restored on this day. This is what Jesus came for and why he declares himself 'Lord of the Sabbath'.^v

For Christians Sabbath hasn't always been quite so clear cut as for our Jewish brothers and sisters. There is evidence that the very early Gentile Christians were discouraged from observing the Jewish custom of sabbath and some, such as Justyn Martyr, even considered Jewish people to be idle for not working seven days a week.^{vi}

It wasn't until Emperor Constantine in 321 AD when the first civil law regarding Sunday observance came into being. The law did not mention the Sabbath by name but he decreed: "On the venerable day of the sun let the magistrate and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed."^{vii}

It is interesting that the institution of Sunday as the Christian equivalent of the biblical Sabbath was brought about not by the Church itself, but by a Roman ruler; but it has endured and even today in our secular culture there are strong voices arguing to retain Sunday as a day of rest; we have seen this just this week with arguments to change Sunday trading laws.

So, how might the divine gift of sabbath rest be evident in our lives and culture? Do we allow space and time to rest with God within the busy-ness of our lives? Do we build into our life a period where we stop and recognise that we aren't in control, that we are free, that all we have is gift?

Sabbath is a gift, but it is a gift that is perhaps left unopened on the table for so many of us. It's there all wrapped up ready for us to enjoy, but we rush around being too busy, too important, too preoccupied to just open it and enjoy it.

Walter Brueggemann is challenging: “In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of...resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.”^{viii}

We are currently in a period of time where the world has entered into an enforced sabbatical of sorts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has of course been a time of pain and distress for many affected by illness. But for others it has also been a time of rest, of blessing and of creative change.

The language of ‘furlough’ (fallow) has entered our lexicon. Work (for some) has slowed down, commuting ceased, traffic quieted for a time, shops remained closed. The relentless activity stopped as we as a world had to remember that there are some things we aren’t able to control.

Many people I speak to are ambivalent about our emergence from this time, not just because of fear of infection, but also perhaps because we are reluctant to end this period which for many has felt like a sabbatical. Have we learned all we need to learn from it? Have we appreciated the gifts that have been evident? Can we ensure we retain some of the healthier rhythms once all this is over? Sabbath is a gift that isn’t just for us as individuals, but for all creation.

I’ll end with a poem by Malcolm Guite which speaks so beautifully of this rhythm of life wherein sabbath is retained and blessing and rest are enjoyed as God’s divine gift to us.

The Seventh Day: Blessing and Rest^{ix}

Blessing and rest, delight in everything
Sustained by your strong love and richly blest,
This is the gift you give, the day you bring
Blessing and rest.

This is indeed the ‘gladness of the best’,
From first lines in the east where linnets sing,
To where the last light lingers in the west,

You lift the cares to which I used to cling,
As you yourself descend to be my guest
And show me how to find in everything
Blessing and rest.

ⁱ Genesis 2:1-3

ⁱⁱ Exodus 16:23-26

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 20:8-11

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 2010, pg 26

^v Matthew 12:11

^{vi} P Bradshaw and M Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts and Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, 2011, pg. 16

^{vii} P Bradshaw and M Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts and Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, 2011, pg. 25

^{viii} Walter Brueggemann, 'Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now', 2014

^{ix} Malcolm Guite, <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/sabbath/>