

Trinity 10, Eucharist

Isaiah 58: 9b-end, Hebrews 12: 18 – end, Luke 13: 10-17

Mother Emma

What is the Sabbath for? Christians celebrate their Sabbath on Sundays, to mark the day of Christ's Resurrection, so what is your first thought on a Sunday morning? A call to worship God and to give thanks for his goodness to us? A time for family, friends and community (including our Christian community)? Time for a lie-in to recover from the week?

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today both encourage us to think more deeply about how we interpret the idea of the Sabbath.

Cultural changes since Biblical times – and even during my own ministry – have constantly transformed our perception of Sundays. In a 24/7 society, with people always available online and even the time-limits of the Sabbath blurred by different time-zones, it is hard to set aside for God and for rest the whole of one day as we are instructed.

The Bible offers at least three different views of the Sabbath: as a day of rest and peace following God's example in Creation; as a holy day consecrated to the Lord and to his worship; and as a time to share the joy, hope and compassion of Christ with others. These may today overlap or diverge.

Staying with my sister in the Scilly Isles one year over the Epiphany, one of my favourite festivals, I was told there would be no service at the tiny, picturesque island church, but when I asked whether there might be a passenger boat, to take me to the slightly larger church on the main island, the churchwarden responded, rather shocked: "There won't be any boats tomorrow – it's *Sunday*." The concept of a day of rest for all within their cultural consciousness was of equal importance to a view of Sunday as a day of worship.

There is no doubt that the earliest discussions of the Sabbath in the Bible do suggest that doing no work on the seventh day is connected primarily with rest and restoring the miracle of life which God has given us.

"On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day...."

The Ten Commandments given to Moses in the wilderness confirm this idea of the Sabbath as a day of rest, but in their vision too, no-one at all should be made to work, even the slaves and the animals:

"For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male and female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

The idea that one day in seven should be free of work, time to recharge your batteries, is clearly an ideal which would be borne out by modern medical research, and the statistics of people suffering from stress through constant and unrelenting pressure of work would confirm this ancient wisdom.

But our Isaiah reading emphasises another aspect of the Sabbath, which might also remind us of austere Victorian traditions.

"If you honour [the Sabbath] by not going your own way and not doing as you please, then you will find your joy in the Lord."

My great-aunt left me her childhood Sabbath jigsaw puzzle, the only toy they were allowed on Sundays, which depicted gruesome Biblical images of the fate of those who worked on the Sabbath, interspersed with images of virtuous Victorians at the church door. It spoke volumes about the idea that the Sabbath should be honoured by not doing as you pleased – a stark contrast with the crowds filling the cafes and shops of Kensington on a Sunday today. But I suspect it also contrasts with the idea of healthy and life-giving rest and recuperation for ALL suggested by the Ten Commandments.

The Victorians were insistent their servants should attend church, but evening services were introduced to cater for the worshipping needs of those who had spent the morning, not enjoying a day of rest but preparing lunch for their employers.

Many in successful secular society today do perhaps continue to see Sunday as a day of rest, with extended brunch in cafes or browsing in the shops, but without any concept of the Sabbath as a day holy to the Lord. They may be outspoken about the need for this kind of rest to maintain their own personal wellbeing, and there is, in this, a reflection of God's own time for restoration. But the thrust of our Gospel reading today is Jesus' frustration at those who prioritise their own wellbeing, whilst ignoring the needs of others or criticising any who see the Sabbath as an opportunity to reflect on and share the joys of God's creation and hope.

Jesus alerts the synagogue leaders to their double standards when they suggest that he should not be healing on the Sabbath. His retort that none of them would think twice about feeding and watering their animals on a Sunday points out their hypocrisy in effectively putting the welfare of their animals above that of another human being, simply, one assumes, because the animals were economically productive, and therefore essential to their own thriving, unlike the health of an unknown elderly woman. It is vital that personal aspirations for Sabbath rest do not result in our ignoring the equal or even greater needs of those around us.

For me, the message of these readings suggest that the Sabbath should be a day when, renewed by worship, we take time to rest and restore our energy, but at the same time, ensure that this opportunity may be extended to all, perhaps by offering hospitality, friendship and kindness; or speaking out on behalf of those obliged in our modern service culture or by economic hardship to work on Sundays or every day.

We may be inspired through our Sunday worship by the hope of the Sabbath rest we are promised for all eternity, encapsulated in the words of one Eucharistic Preface:

"From sunrise to sunset this day is holy, for Christ has risen from the tomb, and scattered the darkness of death with light that will not fade. ... And though the night will overtake this day, you summon us to live in endless light, the never-ceasing Sabbath of the Lord."

Amen