

Sabbath

Introduction

Here lies a poor woman who was always tired,
She lived in a house where help wasn't hired:
Her last words on earth were:
'Dear friends I am going
To where there's no cooking or washing,
or sewing,
For everything there is exact to my wishes,
For where they don't eat
there's no washing of dishes.
I'll be where loud anthems will also be ringing,
But having no voice I'll be quit of singing.
Don't mourn for me now,
don't mourn for me never,
I am going to do nothing for ever and ever.

-Anonymous

I have empathy for this woman!

The passages from Scripture today are certainly challenging me! We all run around at times like headless chickens, even those who are retired. I just have to lob the word 'Christmas' at you and almost all eyes will roll spontaneously!

Many of us are in what is known as the 'in-between' generation, looking after aging parents and being there for growing grandchildren.

We are busy people. 'Busy' can become a badge we wear, something that gives us significance and meaning.

Sabbath is God's antidote to that, a stepping off platform, an opportunity to re-think, reflect, put our lives in perspective again. And it's not an optional extra. God says,

Do it! for your sanity's sake, for the sake of your relationships with others, and yourself and in particular for the sake of your ongoing relationship with me.

Years ago, an observant Jew, said I don't need to go on holiday. We have the weekly rhythm of Sabbath. It refreshes me.

What does the word 'Sabbath' conjure up for you?

For some people it has very negative connotations and memories.

A lot of older people remember church three times a Sunday, uncomfortable clothes and improving books – if they were allowed books

at all! Those memories contribute a lot to why some people will never come back to church again.

For others, there are more positive memories of family times and relaxed meals and fun together.

Reflection, Refreshment and Delight

Genesis 2:2 says that on the seventh day God finished the work he had done and he rested.... *God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.*

A footnote in my *Life with God* edition of the Bible says

The cessation of work is part of the created order, not a fatigued response. The day looks back at what God has brought into being and is set apart as holy by the Creator who rests in its goodness.

There is a sense of stopping work after exertion – like a sculptor standing back after chiselling away for some hours, and looking at what has been accomplished. It's a time of reflecting on what has happened, what has been done, giving thanks for the good and wondering how to do things differently in the future.

The Sabbath also *draws a boundary around the acquisitive urge* we all, to some extent, have. (Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman 1998:747). For this reason the Israelites when they were in the wilderness were forbidden to collect manna on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:23-30). Get a perspective again on life.

Rather than being a burden or negative or legalistic, the Sabbath, according to the Old Testament, was to be a *delight* (Isaiah 58:13). By delighting in it, you share in God's delight in his people!

Remembrance and commemoration

In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, Sabbath is for remembering God's rest after the act of creation. Deuteronomy highlights remembering God's saving work in bringing the Israelites out of the land of Egypt.

The Israelites were commanded to 'remember' the Sabbath and to keep it holy, set apart. (Exodus 20:8).

While the Sabbath was specifically the seventh day of the week, in Jewish liturgy there were other Sabbath times – festivals such as the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:31), the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:39). After the Israelites entered the Promised Land every seventh year was to be a

Sabbath to the Lord (Leviticus 25). Even the land was to have a Sabbath and to lie fallow for seven years.

Set apart

The Sabbath is a time set apart for worship. Isaiah speaks of worshipping God 'from Sabbath to Sabbath' (66:23). In New Testament times at the synagogue there was an emphasis on reading and expounding the Scripture and debating its meaning – not too far from what we are doing today!

Jesus understood the 'set apart-ness' of the Sabbath well. So did the religious leaders.... they thought.

A clash between their two outlooks was inevitable.

When Jesus turns up, Sabbath day observance and synagogue service are far from business as usual.

This could be challenging to us today.

- What are contemporary services of worship like?
- Do we honour the day as 'the Lord's Day'?
- Do we recognise the Lord is **always** present where 'two or three gather in his name'? do we have a sense that indeed, 'the Lord is here'?
- Is there a sense of awe at being in the presence of the living God?
- Are imaginations stretched beyond the old and safe in ways that demand a re-thinking of scripture, tradition, God, everything we thought we were doing for God and everything we thought God was doing for us?

The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath said Jesus firmly.

Because of the ever-increasing regulations at that time for keeping the Sabbath, *the day had arguably evolved into an event which was more work to keep than if they had no day of 'rest' at all.* (Van Harn 2001:194) The regulations had tied people up in ever-tighter red tape with knots of anxiety and stress and guilt.

Jesus reminded everyone that this was never God's intention. The Sabbath was God's good gift to humankind for delight and enjoyment, recreation and restoration.

Jesus demonstrates just this. He defends his friends when they plucked grain on the Sabbath. He heals not just on the Sabbath, but right there in the Synagogue! And he underlines that he has the authority to do so when he says *The Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath*. (2:28). He bends the rules, to the acute discomfort of the religious leaders. *As God's quality-control experts, the Pharisees were only doing their job when they observed Jesus' disciples 'harvesting' on the Sabbath* (Van Harn 2001:194). They heard the assertion in Jesus' statement and did not like it one tiny bit.

In the Gospels the Sabbath is the day which ...frames the re-creative work of God's kingdom as Jesus heals and brings wholeness to human brokenness. The biblical picture of Sabbath builds steadily. It is a day of doing good as well as a day of worship and cessation from ordinary work. (Ryker, Wilhoit and Longman 1998:748)

Now, Jesus who picked food and healed the sick on the Sabbath, is **not** saying to us it's OK to go shopping seven days a week. It's **not** fine to continue with all the headless chicken stuff.

He reminds us of what the Sabbath is there for.

Sabbath recreates us as images of God (Williams 2005:76).

And.....

- *If the hungry and the sick are able to share God's joy, they need to be fed or healed.*
- *The bored and the overworked and overfed need to rediscover Sabbath.* (Williams 2005:77)

The criticism and plotting against him came from those who had forgotten the true meaning of Sabbath. Ellen Glasgow described her father in her autobiography. He was a Presbyterian elder full of rectitude and rigid with duty. She said 'He was entirely unselfish, and in his long life.... never committed a pleasure'. (Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman within: An Autobiography* 1954:15)

Conclusion

A Jewish scholar asked, 'What is the difference between a free human being and a slave?'

We tend to think that it has to do with labour, toil and effort – exploitation. A slave works hard. A free person does not. But in reality, some free people work very hard indeed, especially those who enjoy their work.

The real difference, he said, lies in who has control over time. A free human being works long hours because at some stage he or she has

chosen to. A slave has no choice, no control over time. That is why fixing a calendar was the first command given to the Israelites. It was as if God was saying to them, if you are to be free, the first thing you must master is time.

[At one time it was thought that working weeks would be shortened to 20 hours, but the truth is the working week has grown longer and with all the technology we have at our disposal we can be on call 24/7.] In terms of stress and control over our time, are we freer than we were, or less so? Part of the beauty of Judaism, and surely this is so for other faiths, is that it gently restores control over time.

Three times a day we stop what we are doing and turn to God in prayer. We recover perspective. We inhale a deep breath of eternity. Nor do we rush our meals. Before eating and afterward, we say a blessing. That too allows us to focus attention on simple pleasures, turning our daily bread into momentary epiphany.

Sabbath is a lifesaver.

It's time dedicated to the things that are important but not urgent, like eating together as a family, or celebrating together as a community, or simply giving thanks. These are the things that flood a life with unexpected happiness.

On the Sabbath – unless you are a rabbi – stress has no chance at all. Religious ritual is a way of structuring time so that we, not employers, the market or the media, are in control.

Life needs its pauses, its chapter breaks, if the soul is to have space to breathe.

Otherwise, we may not be in Egypt, but we can still be slaves. (Jonathan Sacks)

And, to return to our poor woman who was always tired – we don't have to wait for heaven to enjoy Sabbath rest!

References

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Ryke, Wilhoit and Longman, general editors, (1998), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*
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Jane Williams (2005), *Lectionary Reflections, Year B*

Questions for discussion

How can we honour the day as 'the Lord's Day'?

OR

How can we do things differently? How can we live 'Sabbath'?