

Sabbath Day

The mixed relationship with Sabbath

We have just heard a story of Sabbath, from the book of Exodus, which seems to be a curious mixture of gift, which is very positive; and threat; which seems very negative.

Amongst the positive gifts of Sabbath are that

- Sabbath is so that we may know God better
- As part of God making us better people
- And as a sign of our relationship with God,
- And also that Sabbath is a day in which God is refreshed, and the implication is “so are we”.

But there is also something difficult and negative hanging over this Sabbath commandment, because it also says:

- “Everyone who spoils the sabbath will be put to death” – verse 14
- “Whoever does work on the Sabbath day will be cut off from the rest of the people” – verse 14

That doesn't seem quite so restful any more...

Enjoy this gift, and take rest,

But if you make a mistake you should be killed

So you see there are two dimensions to Sabbath in Exodus

- Sabbath is a gift that makes you holy
- Sabbath is a command that will lead to your death if disobeyed

It is gift, but in the Old Testament it also comes with threat.

And so for many years, we were so anxious about the threat

That we were unable to enjoy the gift

Who here remembers Sabbath as a threat, and not as a gift?

Who here remembers a favourite thing that you were not allowed to do because it happened on a Sunday?

Was it watching TV?

Was it playing card games?

Was it not being allowed to visit non-believing friends?

Was it being made to wear highly uncomfortable clothing?

And were we influenced by verse 15 which in some translations describes the Sabbath not only as rest, but as “Solemn rest”, and so Sabbath was a day in which to have a special kind of rest, which was solemn rest, rest in which we did not enjoy ourselves?

Who loved Sundays as a child

And who hated them?

This was an exclusively Old Testament attitude to Sabbath

In fact, it missed out the bits of the the Old Testament that saw Sabbath as gift

And only paid attention to the threat.

*** Tell Richard Holloway story ****

This attitude to Sabbath changes by the time we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Jesus, said that we needed to understand Sabbath as a gift, not a straitjacket

“Humans were not made for the Sabbath”, he said, “the Sabbath was made for humans”.

But what of the threat... what of those death threats attached to Sabbath?

It seems that Jesus was not so keen on those, talking about “mercy not sacrifice”. And the Apostle Paul even wrote

“Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food or drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths”. (Colossians 2:16)

So Paul is saying to his congregations that they are not to be condemned on how they keep Sabbath – a verse I am sure many wish we had known about during our childhoods;

But we are still to follow Jesus maxim that Sabbath is a gift, that it is something which enables us to know God and also be refreshed.

And on another occasion he said that we were to interpret Sabbath regulations with “mercy not sacrifice”, in other words to see the benefit of Sabbath, and not observe Sabbath in such a way that it was all about sacrifice and loss.

The Jews often wrestled over Sabbath, what was the meaning, but also seem to have managed to keep Sabbath as a gift.

Jerusalem today is still a city which understands the importance of Sabbath. You will

know that in the Jewish time system, the day begins not at sunrise, but at sunset; so Sabbath begins on what we would call Friday evening, when the sun sets.

The Jewish newspapers publish the time of sunset on any given Friday, that is the cut off time when everybody has to be indoors. And so on Friday afternoons, Jerusalem is a city in a mad rush, buses whizz by, picking up passengers at top speed, Orthodox Jews run down the pavement, pushing other pedestrians out the way; Everybody, everybody, everybody has to be home in time for the Sabbath.

And this day of rest is incredibly healthy. One journalist who moved to Jerusalem from Europe wrote that if we all kept Sabbath, the world wouldn't be in half the trouble it was in".

Another group who take Sabbath observance very seriously are the Seventh Day Adventists. In America, Seventh Day Adventists live on average ten years longer than their peers. Sabbath is very very good for you.

You see if even God had to take Sabbath,

Then we should still do the same.

If God decides to rest

How much more should we.

In the story of Creation, Sabbath was the day when God did not show up to the office, when he trusted the world to somehow get on without him making new things, when he did not feel pressure to match all his achievements of the previous six days, when he did not feel the need to rush to the next thing, nor tidy up the loose ends in all the previous things.

Sabbath was the day when God did not work

And we are told in Exodus 31:17, that on the seventh day, God rested and was refreshed.

There is a power that comes to us when we rest, that does not happen when we work, when we continually work. Even to God. When we take Sabbath, we are refreshed.

If you do not spend time in your life daydreaming, and idling, and doing nothing then you this is something incredibly dangerous, and you are missing out on so much good.

If you have learnt how to do nothing, in a planned, and weekly way, then you are learning to do something which allows you to enjoy life more, to enjoy friendship more, to enjoy food more, to enjoy the world more.

This is especially true for people who are busy. You absolutely need Sabbath. No exceptions, take Sabbath.

If, by the way you are interested in how the Jewish Sabbath, a Saturday, became the Christian Sunday, you may be interested to know that this took many hundred years.

In the early days of the Church, most gentile Christians worked on a Sunday because they had to. Jewish Christians would still observe the Sabbath on a Sunday.

Then on March 7th, in the year 321, the Roman Emperor Constantine, issued a decree that people in the cities “should rest on the day of the Sun”. However he still allowed that people in the country would have to work on the Sabbath if that was the best day for cultivating or bringing in the harvest. It would take another 900 years and the writing of St Thomas Aquinas, for Christians to begin to understand that the Old Testament teachings on the Sabbath should be applied to the first day of the week, the Sunday.

For me this is so important.

God rested on the Seventh Day, so must we.

Jesus taught us that the Sabbath was made for us,

And in Exodus we are taught that Sabbath helps makes us holy

And enables us to be refreshed.

We need Sabbath.

We have to reclaim Sabbath

It is a gift which we have neglected for too long

And a gift which this world badly needs.

For our technology and our patterns of life have become anti-sabbath.

We are fully of hurry and rush and never stopping.

Our phones

press for our attention,

They cause us to be restless,

In this technological age

There we need determined action to reclaim the sabbath.

So what does Sabbath mean for us today?

How to have Sabbaths today?

Firstly, there should be a day that each of us has which is Sabbath.

You don't just take Sabbath when you feel like it, you plan to take Sabbath, and you plan to take it on a weekly basis. In fact, some of the times when you are under most pressure to avoid Sabbath may some of the times when you most need it.

I once met a Pastor whose family were all fishermen on the Moray Coast. He told the story of growing up, and how importantly his family took Sabbath, even when most of the other boats in the fleet, tended to fish on a Sunday. They would watch the other boats go out, and they would think, "surely we should go out there, the money is tight and a few hours extra fishing will help us".

And yet every year when the catch of fish was added up, it was always his family's boats which had caught the most.

Take Sabbath when you are under pressure not to,
And watch how God blesses you.

And plan for Sabbath.

Make your Sabbath a consistent day,

Try to take your rest from bills, from major repairs, from any activity that causes you to be stressed with anxiety, try to take the whole day away from busy things.

Try to make Sabbath an opposite day from the rest of the week – especially for those of you who care for others much of the time, as much as possible, try to ensure that it is a day when others can care for you.

Treat the earth lightly on the Sabbath, do not spend too much time in cars unless this is needed, and try to ensure that something is different, there is a different rhythm and pace to your Sabbath keeping. Try to switch the phone off unless you are facetimeing friends or family members, and try to have face to face conversations with people.

Here is something, risk being bored on the Sabbath day. Learn to live without a schedule, or the many distractions which take us away from being ourselves.

Learn to live with the jobs that haven't been done yet. Because here is the thing. There will never be a day, no matter how hard we work, when every job is done.

Sunday, or the Sabbath is the day, when we try to put a full stop into the week, instead of allowing time to be a continually running sentence.

Sunday is the day to breathe.

So let us take a moment of stillness now, and think of how it might be that we might be more intentional about Sabbath,

And in this may God make us more holy

And may we be refreshed like God

On the Sabbath day.

And this is about taking control of time... of having a rule, of having a different relationship with Time.

This is like the trellis that God has to make us holy, to make us more on the Sabbath day

AMEN