

**Sermon** Trinity 1 Charlbury 9.45am 2 June 2024

Deut. 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

*The Sabbath is made for humankind.*

I went to Sainsbury's once - on a Sunday. I arrived just before 4 o'clock, only to be stopped by the security guy guarding the door. 'Sorry madam', he said, 'we're closing in five minutes and we can't let anyone else inside'. I had forgotten about closing time being 4pm on a Sunday. What an inconvenience, I thought, whose stupid idea was that? I felt quite miffed about it, until I remembered this wasn't exactly keeping the Sabbath holy.

Today's Gospel got me wondering though what we think about Sundays. I'd guess that we probably have some sort of Sunday routine that is a little different from the rest of the week, and things we enjoy particularly on Sundays, but we may not think about it in the way our ancestors did. What's your earliest memory of Sunday? Were there things you weren't allowed to do? Sabbath and Sunday are not exactly the same thing of course, but have we lost the sense of what sabbath is about?

Jesus and the Pharisees seem to have had very different ideas from each other about the sabbath. Keeping the sabbath was a fundamental part of Jewish religious practice and identity, it was the 4th Commandment, and there were all sorts of rules about what you could and couldn't do, a lot of which centred on what counted as work. Genesis says that after God finished his work of creating the heavens and the earth, he rested, and blessed the seventh day as being holy, different from the other six days, set apart for rest. If God rested on the seventh day, so do humans. As Deuteronomy tell us this morning, no work, not even for your slaves, aliens or animals. I've always wondered about the aliens (it conjures up some interesting possibilities...).

Jesus, though, *does* work on the sabbath, apparently in direct contravention of religious traditional practice and law, and of God's direct command. Early on in his ministry, Jesus arrived in Capernaum and on one sabbath he has an incredibly busy day: first he gives some astounding and authoritative teaching in the synagogue, then performs a powerful exorcism, leaving everyone with their mouths dropping open in amazement. And of course word gets out about him. Meanwhile he goes to Simon's house and heals the resident mother-in-law. By that same evening, a huge crowd had gathered round the door and Jesus ended up curing many of them and casting out more demons. That's just one sabbath. No wonder very early the next morning he goes off by himself to find a bit of peace and quiet where he can pray. After a preaching tour of Galilee, he returns to Capernaum and again on the sabbath heals a man with a withered hand. And this is just the beginning, but it sets off a growing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees

that sees them leaving the synagogue to go and conspire with political rivals the Herodians in order to get rid of their mutual problem of this maverick Galilean teacher. Jesus was clearly popular, a powerful teacher and healer, but apparently not subject to their control, and they simply could not let him threaten their way of life, their authority or their religious obligations.

It's all a bit odd though. Mark starts his gospel with good news, but conflict arises very early on, which doesn't sound like good news, and it's not long before Jesus is on a collision course with the authorities. And in today's gospel Jesus seems deliberately to be provoking a confrontation. He and his disciples could easily have honoured the sabbath: they're apparently not starving hungry, there is no urgent need for food; their actions seems arbitrary, casual, as if they're wandering through the fields idly plucking off the tips of the grain. Similarly, the man's withered hand didn't have to be cured on the sabbath, it wasn't a life-threatening condition, at least not immediately. It could have waited until sundown when the sabbath was over, or the next day. Jesus isn't compelled to decide between life-saving action and violation of a sacred duty of keeping the sabbath.

But Jesus *is* angry. Their hardness of heart and lack of compassion have made the sabbath to be a burden, a strenuous set of rules and human observance. It had to be challenged and called out. Better to do good on the sabbath, than harm or even nothing at all to help someone in need. What was the sabbath for? Rest, certainly, but (if we go back to Genesis) there is also a sense of the holy, delight in creation, and (as Deuteronomy reminds us) liberation from slavery and restoration of who we are as God's people. 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'. We weren't created in order to keep a set of rules; we were created to live the life God gave us. Sabbath is restorative, healing, life-giving, holy. I think that's part of the good news Jesus proclaims, not just in what he says, but also what he does. And as Christians we can't help but make the connection with his crucifixion and resurrection, the most powerful way of all in which Jesus restores our life with God.

Jesus' message right from the start was that 'the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news'. He shows exactly what it means for the kingdom of God to come near: teaching, healing, setting people free from demons, forgiveness of sins, eating with tax collectors and sinners (and including them in his company), feeding the hungry even if all you have is a few loaves and fish, even raising the dead to life, like Jairus' young daughter. What comes over strongly in Mark's gospel is Jesus' compassion for people, 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd'. That's what sabbath is about: the kingdom of God coming near, breaking in and bringing good things. Jesus resets the compass.

We're here not just because it's part of our Sunday routine, but because we want to be here, to be guests at Christ's table, to receive his offering of himself in bread and wine, to know that we dwell in him and he in us. We long to receive the good things God wants to give us, to be healed, forgiven, restored, included, to rejoice in creation, to praise God who gives us life. But notice how sabbath is not just about us, we have to make sure others can also enjoy it, including the resident aliens. We have a responsibility for others, to enable the broken and despairing, the lonely, the ostracised, the hungry, the oppressed, the enslaved, the ill and the fearful to know the kingdom of God has come near, that the Risen Christ offers new life, a new creation.

Sabbath is a regular encouragement in the midst of everything else that is going on in our world. 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' You can't help thinking of all those suffering as a result of conflict especially in Gaza, Ukraine, Haiti, and so many other parts of the world, those trapped in modern slavery, those stuck with debilitating or terminal illness, and other needs we could name. Today's gospel, and Jesus' challenge, should make us stop and think. We might not be so concerned these days to stick to Sunday rules, but do we have an agenda of our own that gets in the way of us remembering what sabbath is, for ourselves and for others, and acting on it? To quote that lovely prayer again, 'May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others, we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord'. This is sabbath, and it's for all humanity and indeed the whole creation.

It's a reminder of the vision we signed up for, the mission of God that we are invited to be part of, the love and compassion of God that we are sent out to share, the rest and restoration that even the workaholics among us need routinely and regularly. To be allowed, encouraged or even commanded to stop, and receive, even for a short time, is a wonderful, life-giving gift, that gives us the strength to then go and help others. It might not get us into Sainsbury's on a Sunday afternoon, but it will remind us that the kingdom of God is very near. Thanks be to God! Amen.

*Judy French*