

Sunday 3rd June 2018
Trinity I (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 5.12-15

NT: II Corinthians 4.5-12

G: Mark 2.23-3.6

Here's a question for you? How early in the morning do you feel that you can ring someone up? 8am? 9am? And what about on a Bank Holiday? I am not unduly harsh on such matters, but last Monday – Bank Holiday Monday – as I replied to some telephone messages left on the Church Office voicemail, I waited a while before making the calls. I didn't want to ruin my whole day, so I thought that 10am would be reasonable. The phone rang for a while and when it was answered I said a cheery 'Good morning'. There was a rather sleepy response at the other end, to which my response was, "Ah! I rather think that your morning hasn't started yet." The point was agreed, and I said I'd ring back another time. Jean in the Church Office, who injects some of the Christianity into Church life, suggested later that the person might do shift work and have been working nights, so when I rang her back I checked, and no, she doesn't do shift work.

I am not being censorious, but I have to say that I *cannot* stay in bed that long. Perhaps, in fact, I am envious, because I *really* cannot stay in bed that long. In fact, I have become one of those people who finds it very difficult to take time off, which has led me to reflect on what rest and relaxation is, and what the point of it is.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus' disciples start grazing on the food around them on the Sabbath. This, of course, was nominally against the Jewish Law because it counted as work, but Jesus illustrates that expediency has always been part of the Law, and he illustrates this with a healing miracle, showing that the works of God are not forbidden on the Sabbath. "The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath."

And of course we have wrestled with the idea of the sabbath in the past – mainly in the last 150 years,

rather than earlier. No one was especially bothered about not enjoying themselves on the sabbath before the Victorians stopped children getting out their metaphorical Lego on Sundays, and made them read the Bible instead. There had been restrictions on trading since the Lord's Day Observance Act, 1677, though there were a few loopholes in this which Parliament subsequently tried to close. It took them until the 1930s to realise that hairdressers were still allowed to operate, which prompted a crucial piece of legislation, the Hairdressers' And Barbers' Shops (Sunday Closing) Act, 1930. However, I mention this Act not just for reasons of comedy, but because it made very specific provision that Jewish barbers could close on Saturdays instead of Sundays. What it did not say, unlike the Victorian parenting expectations, is that Christians may not go to a Jewish barber on a Sunday. This is crucial, because even in 1930 they realised the significance of utility against work. Utility is the banner under which Jesus healed the withered hand in our Gospel today, and under which the disciples ate a Pringle or two.

Our first reading, from Deuteronomy, reminds us of the injunctions of the Law, that we dedicate the day of rest to God. But of course this doesn't work in the Victorian manner, because it implies that the other six days are not dedicated to him. It is this that Jesus clarifies and to some extent overturns. "The sabbath was made for humankind." Religion is very often just an articulation of how we live best, it tells us something about ourselves. Whatever work you do on the other six days, whether it is paid employment or whether you are retired or not working at the moment or a student, this you can dedicate to God as well. So what about your seventh day? Well, the world has moved on, and it is not just about those who have to work on Sundays, but it is also acknowledging that our sabbath is taken in different ways now. 24/7 working has become an expectation for many, and taking Sundays off is not practical. But 24/7 workers still need their sabbath. As a self-proclaimed workaholic, I still have to identify those ways in which rest, and those times when I nurture something else in me. Sometimes my sabbath might come in 30 minute bursts, and sometimes in full days, but each is equally important.

But let's turn this question round. Why are we talking about a theology of time 'off' when we could equally well talk about a theology of time 'on'. I have spoken before about how people use paid

employment to define their self-identity. This is not entirely helpful, and we often find in retirement that people define themselves by what they *used* to do, rather than how they see themselves now. It is not paid employment which defines us, but rather activity, and whether you are 5 or 95 there will be activity at the heart of your day.

This is also the theme which we explored last week on Trinity Sunday, that 'being' now gives way to 'doing' as an expression of identity. This has, in fact, always been evident in the Gospels. The narrative of Jesus' life and ministry are not about work and stopping work, but rather about directing everything towards God. Previous generations have noted that Jesus takes 'time out' from his preaching and healing ministry, but it would be wrong to say that this is time off. There is usually an activity defined, and often it is that Jesus went away to pray, or sometimes it just says that he went away from the crowd. So the model for us is not the Victorian one of saying that we take time away from work to be with God, but rather to say that we take time with God away from work. Whatever activity we are doing, we should still be directed towards the orientation we have accepted in our lives, which is an orientation towards God. The rules do not change with a day off.

Acknowledging this also reminds us that we cannot compartmentalize our lives, and this was Jesus' point in our reading today. You cannot save one activity for one mode of being, and another for a different one. As St Paul wrote in our second reading: "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh." You cannot crucify the poor and the dispossessed by day, and do charitable works by night. Instead it is about understanding our lives as a unity and a whole. This is why I am not a great campaigner for Sundays, but I am a great campaigner for the time of rest. "The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath." The sabbath is not a time set aside for God, but a time set aside for us. Whether you take your sabbath as an entire day in one job lot, or whether your sabbath is taken in smaller bursts, it is the entire time which should be devoted to God. Worship is something we enact in our entire lives, and not just in defined moments in Church.

Jesus says, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” He teaches us that it is good to heal on the sabbath, but I say we should do that on the other six days as well.

Fr Crispin Pailing