

Sunday 2nd June 2024
First Sunday after Trinity (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 5.12-15
NT: II Corinthians 4.5-12
Gp: Mark 2.23-3.6

Sorry, I better not stay for another drink. I ought to get home, tomorrow's a working day! That was me last night, out with friends for dinner and then a concert. The irony of the sabbath, a day of rest, as a working day for priests! Many others are required to work on Sundays or their own traditional day of rest. And there are those who simply see the weekend as a time of leisure, a time away from work.

Working in care over the years, I've experienced different faiths' approach to their holy day of the week. I've funded someone to push a former rabbi in his wheelchair to the synagogue on a Saturday as for his family to do so was considered work. More recently, I've worked with staff who request Sundays or Fridays off so they can attend their places of worship because working a 12-hour shift would prevent this. Growing up, Sundays were always Mass first, followed by roast dinner and then those long, seemingly tedious afternoons of being quiet and doing little. Boring for a child but more appealing now!

The tradition of the Sabbath has come from the story of creation when God is said to have rested on the 7th day. It comes too from a practical need to have sometime of rest and recuperation, a time for reflection in a busy world. It is meant to be a joyful and not punitive occasion.

In the gospel today, Jesus chastises and then defies the Pharisees by healing the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. As with so much, they have embraced the letter of the Law and not its spirit. The Law has become a burden, a millstone around the neck of the more vulnerable. Placed there by those who would use it to wield power. Jesus turns this on its head. 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;' So many rules and regulations had grown up around the holy day that the life had been choked out of it, it had become a dull and dry day to be endured and not celebrated.

Likewise my grandmothers who were both from non-conformist families would say that their early memories of Sundays were of dour, silent times when you were meant to reflect on your own sinfulness rather than the love of God.

You might argue that society has moved to the other extreme where we place ourselves at the centre of all things and God is forgotten. But you being here today proves that is not quite true.

If you haven't watched Channel 4's series, Friday Night Dinner, may I recommend it to you. I'm sure many Jewish families still come together to begin the Sabbath with the Friday night dinner, shared in less chaotic circumstances than in the comedy programme. Driving to and from St Nick's on Fridays, I pass the Mosque which is always busy with people going to or coming from Friday prayers. And as I have said, some of us still come to church on a Sunday.

All these gatherings to mark the holy day of rest have common features. They are a time to be with others, perhaps to share food, certainly to participate in public worship of the one true God. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says this. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Beautiful words to be contemplated often and to be central to the purpose of the Sabbath.

Firstly, God shines light in the darkness so that whatever we are living through, whatever suffering or hardship there may be in our lives or in the wider world, there is hope because God shines light in the darkness. Reflecting on this makes the Sabbath a beacon of light in our week. And this same God has shone his light in our hearts so that no matter how lonely or isolated or rejected we may feel within society, we are loved and we belong to the almighty God who created all things. We are not overlooked, we are embraced and brought into God's family. This is reflected in our coming together to share worship, in our welcoming of the visitor, in our acceptance of all who come regardless of any human made distinction. We are all children of God, created in his image and likeness.

And in this light and in this belonging, we begin to see and understand slowly the glory of God at work in our lives and in the world. We will have moments when we experience beyond words the majesty of God as Kenneth Graham so beautifully wrote in *Wind in the Willows*: "Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror - indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy - but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august presence was very, very near." And this light and this belonging and this knowledge of God shines out in the face of Jesus Christ. God made man who did not shun our frail, faulty existence but who came to share in it that it might be redeemed from its prison of

sinfulness and set free so that we might all be the people that God always intended us to be. That we might live lives in the freedom of the knowledge of the love of God so that we might have this treasure in clay jars, that is the grace of God in our human existence. And through this grace, we will come to share in his eternal life.

All that is the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath, to stop and have space just to contemplate our how blessed we are and to give thanks for such blessings. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Revd Michelle Montrose