

10.00 PE & 10.45 MW - Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2010  
Trinity 12 - Year C

Isaiah 58: 9b-end  
Luke 13: 10-17

Firstly, I must start with an apology. Immediately I have finished this sermon, I have to disappear. Not as in Doctor Who, by some peculiar means of time & space travel. But I am due at Brookside Methodist Church at 10.45 to take their service this morning.

Of all the issues facing the church over the years, both Anglican and Methodist, one has always been the observance of the Sabbath.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus argues with his opponents, who criticize him for healing on a Sabbath. Jesus counters, that in healing the woman, he is actually setting her free from bondage. And just as anyone would untie an animal to show it compassion, how much more appropriate it is to release someone from powers that work against human health, wholeness, and freedom.

Well, who wouldn't agree with that ?

Surely, showing compassion, and working for the dignity of every human being, is appropriate on every day of the week. So we applaud Jesus' opposition to a strictly legal view of the Sabbath. We applaud him, and then we turn the page, thankful that we are not weighed down by faulty and outdated interpretations of scripture, that may prevent us from doing the things that we feel are important to do. And perhaps this is where we run into trouble.

Are we too quick to think: **Oh, I'm so glad we don't have to worry about that.**

So we fail to engage seriously with the gift that God intends in his commanding – commanding, not suggesting – for a Sabbath ?

In Jesus, we are set free from a legal observance of Sabbath, but what are we set free for ?

Are we simply free, to add ten more hours to our work week ?

Are we free, to work every day, so that those who may work for us never have a day during which we have not added something to their list of things to do ?

Are we free, simply to add yet another day to our consumer culture of making purchases, acquiring and accumulating ?

Are we free, so that our children's lives can be structured every day, fully scheduled, so they never miss a chance to compete, excel, keep up, or add an activity to a college or job application ?

Of course work, the ability to acquire the things we need, our children's activities and well being, are all good things, in and of themselves. But is there a price we pay in never designating one day in seven, any day, as a day of Sabbath ?

Apparently, people of God have long struggled with how to keep this commandment appropriately. The irritated leader of the synagogue was consumed with finding ways of saying "No." He confronted the crowd, but not Jesus, because they were an easier target.

But Jesus knew the Mishnah's commentary on the Sabbath regulations, that governs the use of animals.

And there is a great danger that we are heard to say more about what cannot be, and little about what we affirm as good and beautiful in our world and in human relationships.

In our first lesson, we hear the prophet Isaiah pronounce these words of the Lord:

**If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day. If you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable. If you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs. Then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.**

Perhaps this ancient reading still shines light on our path.

The problem for Isaiah's audience was that people were pursuing their own interests, not God's. Honouring their own purposes, not God's. So it's no accident that the prophet connects their faulty observance of Sabbath with issues of justice, such as feeding the hungry and meeting the needs of the afflicted. Sabbath, it seems, has always been a justice issue. If we ignore God's purposes for Sabbath, if we ignore hungry people today, all will not be right in our world.

Let me deviate for a moment.

Many years ago, say five hundred, amongst the Churchwarden's duties was to ensure that all parishioners attended church each Sunday. The Churchwardens went out into the byways of the parish, searching for those not at church. Jon and Chris take note. Mind you, they might also note another responsibility of the Church-wardens, that was to brew and distribute beer to the parishioners. I might not mention that at Brookside.

So what does God intend for the Sabbath ? If we're free from the law, what are we free for ?

Well we are free to rest. We all need it: adults and children, executives, bus drivers, students, teachers, nurses and homemakers. We are all mortals, and resting reminds us that we are creatures with real bodily needs to stop, replenish, and rest. This rest is a justice issue, because we need an economy in which people can make a living wage. So that no one needs to work every day of the week in order to make ends meet and provide for the needs of their households.

We are also free to remember our dependency on God. Sabbath reminds us that God is God, and we can stop trying to be like him, or her. On Sabbath, we can rest, worshipping the one God, and learning about the real God.

So we are also free to worship, to immerse ourselves in God's eternity. In a place and time set aside. In an activity in which we produce nothing but praise. Where we are valued, not because of what we make, do, earn, deserve, know, contribute, or achieve, but because we are created by God and loved by God.

Of course, we expect some people to always have to work. How many of us used a bus, in order to get here this morning? How many of us have bought, or will buy, a Sunday newspaper? How many of us have already listened to the radio, or watched the television, for the latest news, or a weather forecast? How many of us have already fed our pets, or even our own families?

And talking of caring for animals, as late as the 1930s, in some villages on the South Downs, shepherds were buried with a lock of raw wool in their hands. This was so that, at the Last Judgement, they could prove what their work had been, and why they had so often missed church on Sundays. It added up to a hope, or perhaps a belief, that one Good Shepherd would recognize another.

Worship gives us a place, in which all that seems so needful during the rest of the week can be burned away, and we can rest, simply and wholly, in the presence of God.

The woman cured by Jesus on that Sabbath must have experienced this in gaining her freedom. She experienced rest from the physical stress of her deformity. She experienced reliance on God, in the reminder that God alone has the power to bring healing. And she experienced true worship, in the praise that issued forth from her lips for what God had done, not what she had accomplished. But Jesus' healing of the crippled woman indicates that those things done in the service of others, for God's Glory and Purpose, are to be done whenever and wherever needed, even on the Sabbath. Jesus seems to be saying, with each incident of this Sabbath work, that when we have the opportunity, regardless of when or where it is, we must do the work that we are given to do, to heal, welcome, love, encourage, serve.

So what about us? How shall we keep Sabbath in our own day? Amen.