

Sabbath Rest

26 August 2007

‘God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it [made it holy], because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.’ *Gen. 2.3*

‘Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.’
Exodus 20.8–11

‘Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord your God.’ *Deut. 5.12–15*

‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’
Mark 2.27

Today’s Readings remind us that keeping the Sabbath is one of the hallmarks of Judaism. The Hebrew word *Shabbat* is typically translated as ‘rest’ or a ‘period of rest’, but a more literal translation is ‘ceasing’, with the implication of ceasing from routine work.

In the Jewish Bible [our Old Testament], the Sabbath is said to serve three purposes:

1. In Exodus, it’s described as a commemoration of God's creation of the universe (Exodus 20.8–11)
2. In Deuteronomy, it’s described as a commemoration of the freeing of the Israelites [the Jews] from slavery in Ancient Egypt (Deut 5.12–15)
3. In the Prophets, it’s often portrayed as a foretaste of the world as it will be in the time of the Messiah.

For Jews, the Sabbath is meant to be a joyous holy day; and, in many ways, Jewish law gives the Sabbath the status of being the most important holy day in the Jewish calendar.

Some 60 years ago, Abraham Heschel, a prominent Jewish scholar, wrote his now classic book called *The Sabbath*. It’s well worth reading. Listen to these edited extracts:

‘The word *qadosh* [holy] is used for the first time in the book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation: And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*.’ p.xvii

‘In Judaism ... the idea of holiness was gradually shifted from space to time... The “day of the Lord” is more important to the prophets than “the house of the Lord”... If God is everywhere, He cannot be just somewhere.’ pp.73–76

‘This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been created, God would establish a holy place – a holy mountain or a holy spring – on which a sanctuary [a holy place] is to be established... But in the Bible it is *holiness in time*, the Sabbath, which comes first.’ p.xvii

‘The seventh day is the armistice [truce] in man’s cruel struggle for existence.’ pp.19–20

‘The Sabbath is the most precious present humankind has received from the treasure house of God.’ p.7

And this last thought has been echoed by a contemporary Christian writer:

‘The day on which God paused for breath is an enduring reminder to us that we are made for more than work. We are made for worship, for play, for childlike wonder, for a constant experience of renewal and re-creation, for a right balance between activity and rest. We are made for one another, and for God, and only when we remember all this will we be able to co-operate with God in furthering the divine purposes, and experience for ourselves the first-fruits of all that God longs to share with us.’ *Gordon Mursell*

Yes, Sabbath observance is an essential part of Christianity, as well as Judaism. But, particularly in the 500 years before the birth of Jesus, a long list of prohibitions [*melachot*] was drawn up by the Jewish lawyers, the Scribes. It was said that, because God had rested from creative activity on the mythical seventh day of creation, Jews (on the Sabbath) should abstain from the types of activity which had been necessary when their forefathers, in the Wilderness with Moses, had constructed the Tabernacle [Tent] made to

house the Ark of the Covenant containing the stones on which the Ten Commandments were written.

In time, the prohibited activities extended from obvious up-front construction activities to everything which lay behind the production of the canvas, the tent-poles, the guy ropes, and the curtains for the Tabernacle. Thus the list included all aspects of arable farming, including sowing and ploughing, and many aspects of sheep and cattle farming.

Well, you might say, that makes Sabbath observance fairly straightforward for the modern Jew – most of whom are not farmers or construction workers. Or does it? The trouble is that religion – all religions – seem to attract people desperate for security, and security for them requires absolute certainty in relation to God, and how we obey what are perceived to be God's commands. And that leads to narrow, restrictive 'legalism' – religion based on laws and fear, rather than love and freedom.

Transporting [carrying] is one of the prohibited categories. So, if I was an Orthodox Jew, I must not carry things on the Sabbath for more than the specified distance of about 2 metres... Oh dear, what about my keys, my key ring? Well, surely there must be a way round that! Yes, I've got it; I'll convert the keys into part of a belt buckle or brooch. And so the keys become an article of clothing or jewelry – which of course is worn, and not carried.

Again, for the strict Orthodox Jew, filtering undrinkable water to make it drinkable is prohibited on the Sabbath, and so is picking small bones from fish. Orthodox Jews (on the Sabbath) will not use electric appliances, or even electric lights, because tiny sparks are created in the switch when it's turned on, and this constitutes 'lighting a fire' (forbidden category 37). A common solution to this problem is the use of pre-set timers, to turn electric appliances on and off automatically, with no human intervention.

So what is meant to be a joyous day's break from the routine round of work, a time to refresh physically, psychologically and spiritually, becomes enmeshed in a web of increasingly complex restrictions – compounded by an equally complex set of ruses to circumvent the petty restrictions.

No wonder Jesus angrily denounced the leader of the synagogue (and the Jewish lawyers more generally on other occasions) as hypocrites: 'You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!' (Matt 23.24).

In the Gospel narratives, we read on several occasions how Jesus deliberately flouted Sabbath legalism, stressing that ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2.27). Indeed, Jesus often urged his listeners to consider the rationale, the reasoning, behind any command. In this case, it is that human beings need to take breaks from their routine activities. You could say: if you don’t take breaks, you’ll break.

A Sabbath well spent
Brings a week of content
And health for the toils of the morrow;
But a Sabbath profaned
Whate’er may be gained
Is a certain forerunner of sorrow.

But for many Christians today, Sabbath observance is a major challenge. After all, cows need to be milked 7 days a week, children need constant parenting, and seriously ill patients cannot be left uncared for. So a strict one-day-in-seven is impossible for many of us. Even so, ring-fencing Sabbath time, ring-fencing holidays [holy days] is essential for healthy living and spiritual growth:

So at the end of the holiday season, before your life becomes totally frenetic again, I urge you to review your Sabbath observance. Are you cheating on yourself (and God), or are you playing fair?

If like me, your workaday world is centred on modern technology – the computer, internet, email and telephone – I suggest we need to think about such things as:

1. A no-mobile-phone day each week
- 2.**A no-email and computer day each week
- 3.**A weekly television- and video-free day for the whole household
- 4.**A total ban on mobile phones, email and television when on holiday.

Not because of an externally imposed legalistic prohibition, but as a personal way of achieving an essential break from the tyranny of non-stop availability, 24/7.

And it's not just Sabbath observance that we need to reflect on. It's possible that some of what we personally regard as unchanging Christian truth may be no more than the theological fashion of yesteryear. Continued unquestioning acceptance of our 'beliefs' may well lead us into a spiritual blind alley, a personal dead end. And this could result in our reacting like the leader of the synagogue should anyone suggest that, as a church, we might do certain things differently. Or, if not an angry outburst, sullen stubborn resistance because 'That's not the way we do it here.'

So I wonder: when Tim Stead, our soon-to-be new vicar, suggests we do some things differently, that we alter the focus of our activities to be more inclusive of the wider community, what will your reaction be? I hope we'll not respond like the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day – and begin to plot a way of getting rid of him, or picking up stones and threatening to stone him.

Tim Stead is not Tom Honey, nor should he try to be. He is Tim Stead, and he [and his family] comes to us with a wealth of past experience and acquired insights. Although for many people the thought of change is unsettling, I believe that we should be expecting – with Tim and Susie – to re-evaluate our understanding of what it should mean to be 'church' in the 21st Century.

And, if a year hence, we've not grown collectively in our understanding of what it means to be 'church' in Oxford today, that will be a tragedy – yes, a tragedy for us, as well as for the wider community. So, as we observe our Sabbath breaks, reflect – and pray that God will show us what he wants of us collectively, the congregation of Holy Trinity church, Headington Quarry.