

Mark 2:23-3:6 Sermon for 11am

One of the most profound verses in the bible is right near the start the account of creation:

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

Right back at the dawn of time, however you interpret the creation account, God set in place a pattern of living which included rest – even for God himself. It’s a strange idea that God rested, and it raises loads of questions – “Was he tired?” “What did he do on his day off?” “Does that mean the newly created world had to function on its own for a day while God was ‘out of office’?”

These are great questions to mull over together, because they start off sounding funny and shallow, but quickly lead into really interesting theological conundrums about God’s relation to his world, the nature of God himself, and the nature of God’s interaction with the world... None of which we have time for today I’m afraid.

Importantly for us today is the sheer fact that God, even at the start, and even for himself, set apart a day for rest. Later, this was enshrined in the law of Israel in the 10 commandments:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

For Israel, not only was there a day of rest, but it was rest for everyone and everything, including the animals! If you had a hamster wheel powering the electric in your house, the hamster had to be allowed to rest too. This shows a concern, not just for Sunday church attendance (or the Jewish equivalent) but a concern for something more pervasive which extended beyond ritual, or pure recreation, to something holistic, for creation itself.

Again, it’s a massive thing to explore, but for us, this sets the scene for our readings today where we have two episodes from Jesus’s life where his behaviour on the Sabbath (the Jewish Holy day of rest) was controversial. And it’s too easy to just jump into some churchy condemnation of Sunday trading laws, or such like, or dive into a debate about the rights and wrongs of Sunday sport, from a passage like this. But that would be to miss the huge context of it and focus on the minutiae – in effect we’d just end up doing exactly what the Pharisees, the Jewish religious elite, in the reading were doing.

But really today, we need to focus on a few key things. The first being that the Sabbath, the day of rest, was made for humanity, and not the other way around, as Jesus says. In both episodes, technicalities of Jewish law would have prevented the satisfying of hunger or the healing of a birth defect. For Jesus, the legalities and concern for keeping the Sabbath Holy, sacred, set apart, and for following the letter of the laws, had meant that the original, intrinsic concern for human flourishing had been lost in a web of do’s and don’ts. The foundation of the Sabbath is the welfare of humanity: it isn’t intended by God as an additional burden to bear. The Pharisees were noting that the disciples rubbing grain in their hands to remove the chaff so they could nibble was a contravention of the law about not threshing your harvest on a Sabbath. But Jesus was remembering

how even the sacred bread had been used to satisfy human needs hundreds of years earlier. When the Pharisees were watching to see how Jesus would react to the needs of a disabled man, Jesus was watching to see how God's power could bring life and healing to a sad and desperate situation.

The setting apart of a day in our week is for our benefit, not for our detriment. How sad it is when we end up in a situation where we care more for custom and technicality than we do for our fellow brother and sister human beings. Sunday isn't just the day when we go to church. Our faith isn't reduced to Sunday attendance alone. Instead we have been given the gift of rest by God, for our benefit and for the benefit of those around us.

Jesus claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath: the one who decides what is right. And for us, this makes sense because we claim, as Christians, that Jesus is both human and divine – the author of the Sabbath and the recipient of its benefits at the same time. Who else is better placed to make these decisions!?! However, this means that the Sabbath doesn't just belong to us for us so that we do exactly what we want with it – instead, it's Jesus's day. So how does what we do on our Sabbath bring honour to God and preserve Jesus's Lordship of it I wonder?

In the second story, Jesus passionately widens out the Sabbath's purpose from simply rest to doing Good. The Pharisees knew that Jesus did miracles; that wasn't the issue. They assumed he would heal the man. The question was whether he would do it on the Sabbath. Jesus could have waited and made an appointment to meet the guy tomorrow, or done it in secret. But instead, he tells him to "come forward" which literally meant "arise in the middle" – so everyone could see. Clearly, this wasn't something which he wanted to keep quiet. He wanted everyone to know that doing nothing, wasn't really an option. Even despite this man's disability being something he'd lived with since birth, and despite it being non-life-threatening, to make him wait even a day longer for his healing was not life-giving. For Jesus, there was no halfway house – the Sabbath was a day of Good and Life, and the only alternative was harm and death. There was no middle ground! Put in those terms, no wonder Jesus was angry when he saw those around him would rather let the man continue to suffer so they could avoid dealing with grey areas in their religious technicalities!

Jesus's opponents here, kept their law perfectly by doing nothing, and instead, their Sabbath work was to watch, accuse and conspire. Jesus broke the technicalities of the religious law and brought life, renewal and restoration. Which is most appropriate?

And so the Sabbath is seen as a day for renewal and rest, but also service of God in loving God and loving God's world and all the people we meet. Jesus demonstrates, that just as lots of the bible says before his time, God's interest isn't so much legal as heart-based. God isn't just concerned with ritual obedience when there are people hurting and crying out. God isn't concerned with our Sunday attendance and declarations of our love if we don't love others. God isn't concerned with how much money we put in our offerings if we cheat, steal, extort, fail to pay, or abuse the poor to get it. For God, our Sabbath rest doesn't mean we can take a selfish view of our time that negates looking after those around us.

Now, practically speaking, this is really difficult. Taking a day off can be tough. When we are parents or carers, a day off never feels like a day off anyway! When we are revising for exams, taking a day off feels irresponsible. When we're working hard, taking a day off can feel impossible. Even if we are retired, making a day different from the others when we have so many competing pressures on our time can be tricky. The Sabbath was made for us, not to trap us and make us feel bad. On the other hand it is our creator's pattern for us. We need to balance it carefully.

And then we each need to think about how that Sabbath day off is honouring of our creator, and not just doing what we want. How it is doing Good and bringing Life, rather than just side-lining everything that isn't our immediate personal concern or enjoyment.

We all need to work out for ourselves how this fits into our high-paced lives. How amazing it is, though, that we are given the gift of rest and the chance to bring life to ourselves and others around us, and that this is something that God actually really cares about. Isn't it great that part of our faith journey can be enjoying these fallow times regularly so we don't just get to the end and life has rushed us by or so we don't get to the end and find that life has been all about us. Instead, we are given the gift of sabbath so when we come to the end of our journeys, get there as people who have loved and given life, rested and given healing, followed Jesus and been rewarded. Amen.