

Pentecost 11 Year C (25th August 2019)

Luke 13.10-17

‘Come to me, all you that are weary, and carrying heavy burdens; and I will give you rest ... rest for your souls’ (Matt. 11.28). Words of Jesus, of course, though not ones from our Gospel reading this morning. They are, though, highly relevant to it. After all, the *Sabbath* is all about rest. It is, as popular parlance has it, ‘the day of rest’ (even though that is barely reflected in our post-Christian culture where, increasingly, anything resembling sabbath observance has fallen away even among Christians, as the world churns on in its tracks, offering us just another helping of the same old same old – opportunities for buying and selling and striving, 24/7, to improve our lot in life. But God’s command, to Israel and to us, is intended to interrupt all this: ‘Thou shalt labour for six days’ God says (Have you noticed how, when God is getting heavy with us, God likes to use seventeenth century English – so much more ... authoritative sounding somehow!), ‘Thou shalt labour for six days’, God says, ‘but remember the sabbath day – the seventh day – and keep it holy’. It’s a day of rest, not because we feel as though we need one after six days of graft, but because God tells us that that’s how it must be. So why, we wonder, in today’s Gospel, does Jesus apparently break it, doing so, in fact, in a very public and remarkable way, and right under the Rector’s nose (much to the annoyance of the Rector, though, true to form among churchgoers, he doesn’t confront Jesus directly, but mutters and grumbles in other people’s hearing). What’s going on?

‘Come to me all you who are weary and heavily laden, and I will give you rest, ... rest for your souls’. Isn’t rest, rest for our souls, rest for our spirit, precisely what life in today’s world denies us – keeping us busy and striving constantly to keep up, whether that’s in our work life, or our home life, or our leisure pursuits, or (dare we admit it), for those of us who are Christians, even in our faith? Isn’t such constant striving (with its forever receding goals) precisely what forever burdens us and leaves us perpetually weary – suspecting that we haven’t done enough, got enough, made enough, and so will just have to strive harder and for longer to get whatever we suppose ‘enough’ to be.

And *what is it* that we are striving for but can never actually find or achieve in life? Surely, at root, it’s a sense of contentment, of being at peace with ourselves and the world, a sense of well-being, of joy even, in our lives, our living, our employment, our relationships. Peace and joy – those intertwined commodities that, despite the world’s promises that if we just try a bit harder, choose more wisely, exercise our freedom to make and to sell and to buy whatever it is that is currently held out to us as the thing that, if we have it, will bring us the very sense of satisfaction and fulfilment we crave, are actually in very short supply – glimpsed for the most part rather than actually experienced. Joy, it’s been said, is peace dancing; and peace is joy resting. There’s a lot of depth and insight in that suggestion; but we so rarely get to experience either.

Instead, measuring ourselves, and our worth, and the worth of others by what are mostly someone else’s deliberately exalted or standards, someone else’s expectations, someone else’s ideals, what someone else persuades us is really the gold standard of success, in the acquisition or accomplishment of which that sense of peace, of well-being, of joy, of being

able at last to rest, will finally be ours, we discover instead that we fall short – that the goal posts seem mysteriously to have moved again, the bar has been raised, the finish line shifted once again just over the horizon. And in a world living in accordance with the gospel of ‘increased productivity’, driven by the false promise that, if we just strive a bit harder, everyone can experience well-being through being able to acquire more, and better, and faster and at a bargain price, it is of course inevitable that the goal posts, the bar, the finish line will constantly be subject to mysterious slippage. Because if we ever think we have arrived, if we ever think we have done enough, made enough, got enough, spent enough, we might just stop, and our contribution to the artifice of the socially and economically generated rat-race will falter, so our expectations, ideals, aspirations and goals need constantly to be shifting just beyond our grasp, keeping us busy, keeping us working hard, keeping us productive and pliant contributors to the very rat-race that, while offering to set us free, in reality is interested only in keeping us enslaved.

Is it any wonder that a society like ours is experiencing an epidemic of medical conditions linked directly to stress and anxiety and exhaustion – physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. A society that feeds on our insatiability for a well-being that we don’t yet have, that has a vested interest in telling us at every turn that we’re not yet good enough, not productive enough, not trying hard enough, to acquire something that surely lies just beyond our grasp, and persuades us that our failure to succeed in measuring up (to secure the promotion and pay rise; to score the top grades in exams and show how intelligent we are; to brandish on our wrists the latest iWatch; to take our holidays in hot exotic locations rather than damp, midge-infested ones; to be ‘in’ with the right crowd among our peers, winning popularity and the respect of those we (rightly or wrongly) look up to; to write the discipline-changing monograph—whatever the aspiration, the goal, the target is, whatever sphere of life it crops up in) is a measure of our worth as human beings, of our value to society, to our family, to others, and that by missing the target we are missing out on what real life is all about. Is it any wonder? I suspect not.

‘Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,’ says Jesus, ‘and I will give you rest ... rest for your souls.’ ‘Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy’, says God to the Hebrews. The one is an offer, a gracious offer. The other a command lying at the heart of the Jewish law. But they add up to exactly the same thing. For this, the fourth commandment out of ten, is no arbitrary prescription, but, precisely as a *commandment*, a gift of God’s grace, and a sign of who God is and who God made us and calls us and longs for us to be. The command is given, remember, from Sinai in the immediate aftermath of the exodus, when God released the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt. Pharaoh’s, too, you see, was a production economy, and one in which Israel’s role was one not just of forced labour, but of *ceaseless* labour, meeting themselves coming back in the attempt to meet Pharaoh’s targets, making the number of bricks required to build storage facilities so that, a bit like the farmer in the parable we considered a few weeks ago, Pharaoh could store as much grain as he could possibly acquire – massive warehouses where goods could be hoarded and their flow controlled in the ancient world’s exemplary growth economy. So, no matter how hard the Hebrew slaves worked, they could never produce enough to meet the demand, being driven to collect the straw for their bricks on their own, relatively slender

and very precious, time. It was a target driven existence, one fueled by anxiety and endless toil under harsh taskmasters, so that, the book of Exodus tells us, the Hebrews groaned under the unrealistic and relentless burden laid upon them; groaned, indeed, so loudly that their cries were heard by God who was appalled by their plight, and promised them: 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from enslavement to their demands ... I will take you as my people, and I will be your God' (Exod. 6.6-7).

God kept that promise, and Israel became God's people. And God was determined that never again should they be enslaved by a form of life that placed impossible demands on them, weighing them down and causing them to groan. And so, on Sinai, in mapping out for them the shape life as God's people was to take, God builds into their pattern of life a temporal sacrament of God's goodness, a mandatory interruption of the pressures which unjust, or unrealistic, or false demands from the world so readily lay on us, until they begin to crush us with their weight, and cause us to groan. 'Guess what', God tells them, 'I'm not Paroah. And life with me is never going to be a crushing burden. It's never going to be about the success of my grandiose projects resting squarely on your shoulders, so that you have to strive 24/7 *and then some* in order to fulfil my requirements, working flat out in an effort just to keep in my good books (as though that were even possible). Don't forget', God tells them, 'I am the God who freed you from the burdens laid on you by the socio-political machinery of Egypt – with all its targets and quotas and audits. I'm not about to impose a whole new set of my own!'

So, you see, the Sabbath commandment is a gift – a temporal sacrament reminding Israel again and again that God is a God who liberates from bondage, and who will not permit bondage of any sort to define who his creatures are or are called to be. Of course, there's work to be done, and some of it is important, and some of it is very hard. But work, productivity, meeting targets, fulfilling expectations, succeeding in the economic race is NOT what human life is about, and we must never allow it to enslave us in its schemes. Sabbath is a sacrament of our liberation from such slavery; a sacrament, indeed, which reminds us continually that our existence and our flourishing and our enjoyment of life themselves come to us as the gift of God, and not in the slightest as a result of our striving. It speaks of God's lordship, God's mercy, God's goodness. And Sabbath observance (whatever form that may actually take in our lives – and that's the topic for another sermon) is an act of counter-cultural resistance, an insistence on living as those who know that their lives are lived out under God's lordship, and a steadfast refusal ever to submit to the crushing yoke which, in whatever form—social, economic, political, religious even—the world seeks to lay on our shoulders.

Sabbath, then, is about freedom, liberation from an inhuman bondage and anxiety. But, even more than that, Sabbath is about receiving from God the gift of our own humanity, embracing what is ultimately the purpose for our creation, stepping aside from the world's attempts to mould us in *its* image, and reminding ourselves that we have already been created in *God's* image. The God who not only set Israel free and, in Jesus, offers to set us free too; but who, in the story of creation, is to be found labouring for six days, and then, stepping back from that creative effort not to recharge God's divine batteries; not so that God could return to the task even more vigorously and energetically later. But simply to

enjoy it. To enjoy what God had made. To experience the peace and the joy of *having created* and, since by that point in the story the creation is indeed already complete, we must say to rest and to enjoy the world together with God's creatures. Creatures whose existence is not to be understood or defined in terms of their usefulness, or their productivity, or their contribution – but simply in terms of their capacity to share in God's peace and joy, to enjoy it in their own creaturely fashion, and to rejoice in it.

That's what the Sabbath commandment, the Sabbath gift, the sacrament of time-out from the busyness of life is really all about. Time out *not* on the naughty step; but the gift of time to take in order to rest and enjoy the sheer goodness of God's world, to enjoy it as God enjoys it; to enjoy it together with God. I'm not letting you slip back into that old productivity related way of life, God says. We're going to do things differently from now on.

So, finally, we come back briefly to today's gospel, and Jesus' spontaneous work of healing. Healing a woman who has been struggling for eighteen long years with some condition that compels her to keep her eyes fixed on the floor rather than being able to lift them to the heavens, to bear the indignity of a painful and demeaning existence, almost going about on all fours, instead of standing upright as human beings are intended to, curved in upon herself, rather than unfurled and open to receive God's good gifts with her own two hands. 'Oi!', says the Rector (known in those days as the leader of the synagogue), 'what are you doing here, tempting this man into making a mockery of the sabbath law. Isn't it clear enough for you? There are *six* days on which work ought to be done. Six! And the seventh is to be a work-free zone'. Jesus, we are told, when he saw the woman, called her over to himself. 'Woman, he told her, 'you are *set free* from your ailment', and, Luke says, 'immediately she stood up straight, and began to praise God'. 'Come to me all who are weary and struggling under a burden', says Jesus, and I will give you rest, peace, well-being'.

To heal, or not to heal, that is the question. It's difficult not to conclude that the leader of the synagogue, with his legalistic anxiety about correct religious performance, might just have been missing the point.