

Readings for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

2nd June 2024

First Reading: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

The Lord says this:

‘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 day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’s sake. For it is the God who said, “Light will 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 Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us but life in you.

Gospel: St Mark 2:23-3:6

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?” Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

You will, I am sure, have recognised the references to the fourth of the Ten Commandments in today's readings from Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Mark: 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy' (Exodus 20:8).

The concept of Sabbath as a day of rest first occurs very early in the Old Testament. At the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis, after God had created the world, we are told that he rested on the seventh day, and he blessed that day and made it holy. God set aside time to delight in everything that God had made.

In the book of Exodus, the Sabbath as a day of rest is established in the Law in the giving of the Ten Commandments. It is a positive commandment (it does not start 'You shall not...' as many of the others do) and it comes with quite a lot of detail.

"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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it (Exodus 20:8-11).

It begins 'Remember...' – Keep this in mind! Don't forget! But part of remembering is also looking back, remembering the link to God's rest after the work of creation, and also remembering that God has delivered them from slavery in Egypt where they were defined by their work and productivity; from now on, as free people, they will work six days but rest on the seventh.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is part of a later reiteration of the Ten Commandments as Moses reminded the people of their covenant relationship with God after many years journeying in the wilderness. It is very similar to the commandment given originally and the link with their freedom from slavery is made explicit. Like the Exodus version, its mention of livestock is a reminder that all of creation should also have a Sabbath rest. This Sabbath concept was established for the land too; when the people settled down from their journey in the wilderness, every seventh year the land was to lie fallow, free from cultivation (Exodus 23:11), and similarly with the year of jubilee every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:11-12).

The Old Testament established the Law concerning the Sabbath, and Sabbath observance was important in Jesus' time. Today's Gospel illustrates how that Law should be interpreted and applied.

In the first example, Jesus and his disciples were going through the fields, and they plucked some heads of grain. For the Pharisees, harvesting on the Sabbath was contrary to their interpretation of what constituted work, and was therefore forbidden, and they were quick to challenge this behaviour. But Jesus and his disciples were not harvesting the crop for storage, they were picking something to eat to satisfy their hunger. Jesus used an example from history to illustrate a different interpretation. In that example (1 Samuel 21), David and his men were fleeing from the anger and threats of King Saul. In need of food, David asked the priest, Ahimelech, for bread for his men, but the only bread available was the Bread of the Presence. This was the holy bread, presented to God each Sabbath, and the only people permitted to consume it were the priests of God. However, both David and Ahimelech recognised that the need of the men for food was an essential need and, as such, more important than a technicality of the law, so they were given the holy bread.

In giving this example, Jesus established that attending to essential human need should not be considered a violation of the Sabbath. As he goes on to say in the second illustration in the passage, in which he heals the man with the withered hand also on the Sabbath: 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?'

The underlying question in this Gospel passage is do we worship a God who establishes laws to be followed no matter what, or a God who desires human wellbeing, healing and wholeness? Indeed, what is God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath? Jesus is quite clear when he says: 'The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath' that he is choosing the second of those options. It is the principles that matter, not the letter of the Law.

In establishing the Sabbath, God ordained one day in seven to be restful and holy for the good of human beings and all of creation. We all recognise the need for downtime, rest and refreshment for our wellbeing, even if we are not very good at taking it. We need time to enjoy creation and the many good things that God has given for our pleasure. We need times of freedom away from the concerns and demands of our working lives. And we all need time and space to turn our attention to God, to honour God, to nurture our relationship with God and to grow in our faith. We need Sabbath time.

Since the earliest days of the church, the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, was Sunday, the day of resurrection. When I was a child, Sundays were distinct from other days of the week. My family usually went to church in the morning, which many of my friends did not, but my parents did not put other restrictions on what we did on Sundays. Yet the day was different because you couldn't do many of the things you could do on other days of the week. Shops and businesses were shut, public transport was more limited and, apart from essential services, most people didn't work. For many families, it was a day to enjoy time together, perhaps to go out to visit friends or relatives and enjoy a leisurely meal, perhaps to go for a walk or a picnic. It was, in a sense, a Sabbath for everyone irrespective of faith.

That has all changed, of course. For most people now, Sundays are just like any other day of the week. Many of us have to work on a Sunday. Even if we don't, for Christians, the desire to attend church to worship God is often in competition with other demands on us. But our need for Sabbath time remains important. We still need time to rest, freedom from work, time to enjoy ourselves with friends and loved ones, and time to devote to God, but it can be much harder to carve out of busy lives.

From today's Gospel, Jesus makes clear that the principle of Sabbath is to meet our needs, and not be prescriptive, for we live in a changed world. For those of us able to attend church, we preserve some of that Sunday Sabbath distinctiveness, although the rest of the day can then disappear in a whirl of normal activity. But our faith is for every day of the week, not just Sundays, so in some ways, the demise of a distinctive Sunday could be regarded as helpful as we are forced to seek out other times in the week as Sabbath time. The danger is that it is also easier not to do it at all; or other things crop up and we postpone, sometimes indefinitely.

We only hear today's readings occasionally, in those years when Easter is early, and we are at this point in our Lectionary Cycle. So, perhaps, we should regard them as a gift, a gentle reminder, especially to those of us whose

lives are very busy, of the need to reset occasionally and to give proper priority to our Sabbath time and to God at whatever time in the week this is possible.