

**2<sup>nd</sup> June 2024 Truro Cathedral**

**Deut 5: 12 – 15**

**2 Cor 4: 5 – 12**

**Mark 2: 23 – 3: 6**

Most versions of the ten commandments place the keeping of the Sabbath at number four. In Roman Catholic usage, it sometimes comes at number three because numbers one and two – about turning away from idolatry and towards the worship of the one true God - are elided into one, and number ten, on covetousness, is split into two. But the difference is not significant for us this morning. Suffice it to say that the list of ten commandments – the Decalogue – from which our OT reading comes today is the same list as we find in chapter 20 of the book of Exodus and was, and is, the defining moral code for the people of God – in ancient times as also today.

Whichever version of the Ten Commandments we look at, the third or fourth commandment, about the keeping of the Sabbath, forms a link, a hinge if you like, between the commandments that come before – which are about our relationship with God – and those that come after, concerning our relationships with one another. The keeping of the Sabbath is given to us, it seems, as a practice that encourages us to look both upwards and around us, both inwards and outwards, both to God and to our neighbour. And as this commandment comes right in the middle of these ten directions for living given to us by God, we can perhaps infer that God is here supplying us with a practice that is designed to lie firmly in the centre of our life of faith, a practice that therefore enables us to re-centralise ourselves, week by week, into the lives to which God calls each of us.

The American OT theologian Walter Brueggemann has pointed out the importance of Sabbath-keeping in a little book, published some years ago now, in which he reflects deeply on the whole question of 'what is the sabbath about?' – what is it for? And why might God have considered this at-first-sight rather peripheral commandment so important? (*Sabbath as resistance* by Walter Brueggemann, publ 2014 by WJK press, Louisville, Kentucky). In his book, Brueggemann suggests that, properly understood, Sabbath-keeping is a form of cultural resistance, a way of challenging the default ways in which human beings tend to do things, a way of looking simultaneously towards both God and our neighbour and rebalancing ourselves in that space. You may remember that Jesus takes a rather similar line when he sums up the law in the two commandments of 'love of God and love of neighbour'. He charges us with looking both ways at once as it were, towards God and towards our neighbour – and perhaps we can understand Sabbath-keeping as helping us to do that.

One of the principle human follies that Brueggemann identifies as needing the crucial re-balancing of the sabbath is the anxiety that so easily penetrates our human psyche and destroys the vitality of our humanity from the inside out. Jesus says something similar during the sermon on the mount as he advises his followers to put away anxiety and to live as the flowers and birds do – by trusting in the grace of God and learning to be content in God's love.

Similarly, the keeping of the Sabbath, lying at the heart of the ten commandments, is given as an antidote to the anxiety which the followers of Moses are at high risk of having brought with them from Egypt and at even higher risk of carrying over into their new lives in the promised land.

'Remember', says Moses in the reading we heard today 'that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand'. They have escaped *from* Egypt and the question of what they have escaped *to* begins to loom large. They have escaped from an Egyptian regime in which all life is ruled by the frenetic anxiety of getting more and more, and making more and more and only being secure when they have great piles of stuff stored up in their warehouses. But I, says God to his people, I am calling you to a different way of being. The ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs was every bit as acquisitive, exploitative and greedy as any Western consumerist culture of modern times. It was a culture, as is ours today, that was riven with anxiety about scarcity, about the future, about never having enough and about who was in a position to exercise power over whom. It was a culture that bred anxiety in leaders and slaves alike; a culture that only really functioned if every person in it carried within themselves a certain amount of anxiety on a variety of different levels.

It is into this frenzy of anxiety that God, in the practice of Sabbath-keeping, says 'stop'. Indeed, more than that according to Brueggemann, it is through the keeping of Sabbath that God's people are called to resist the pressures of the anxiety culture that they have inhabited for so long and which they carry with themselves even now within their hearts.

So perhaps that helps us to understand the significance of the placing of this commandment between the two arenas in which our lives are called to be different – in our relationship with God and in our relationship with our neighbour. Our observance of the Sabbath pause is designed to enable us to realign ourselves week by week with the values of God, in which there is enough for everyone in a world without greed – and thus no need to be anxious.

And this, surely, was part of what Jesus was getting at in our gospel reading this morning – the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. On one level Jesus was criticising the falseness of Sabbath observances that simply increased anxiety levels among the populace – the myriads of fiddling little rules that only the powerful and wealthy could really keep. But at

another level, Jesus is making clear that in fact all of us need Sabbath, the whole of human society needs the Sabbath awareness of contentment in the face of anxiety, of rest in the face of habitual grabbing and getting.

I have been struck in the last week as the General Election Campaign is getting underway, by the underlying anxiety that marks, it seems to me, so much of the electioneering, the media coverage and the views of people as they are canvassed. Many of the values that are being demonstrated around us would, it seems to me, resonate with the society of ancient Egypt from which the Israelites had escaped. Many of us will be aware of soaring rates of anxiety among our young people, and I don't believe the issue is any less prevalent amongst older people – we have just come to terms with it differently. Anxiety is a feature of our Western society – indeed, it is the oil which lubricates the wheels of our whole economy. Consumerism only works by making people anxious about the inadequacy of their possessions. But it results, of course in huge amounts of damage both to human souls and bodies and to the planet for which we fail to care well, as God has commanded us to.

To all of this, the keeping of the Sabbath is an antidote and, to use Brueggeman's word, resistance. It is a statement of our refusal to accept the anxiety-inducing pressures of the world around us.

It is easy, I think, in our individualised society, for us to hear Jesus' injunction about the importance of proper Sabbath-keeping as being about ourselves and our own personal 'well-being' to use a word we commonly hear today. And it is true that we all need to do what we can to keep physically and mentally healthy if we are to live well the lives that God calls us to and regular rest is part of that. But if we look at the fourth commandment in its full context we will see that this is about the health of the whole of society – indeed, about the impossibility of there being any such thing as well-being for one person unless and until there is well-being for all. The keeping of the Sabbath helps us to see that this well-being – what Jesus, in John's gospel, calls fullness of life – is about our relationship with God as well as with our neighbour – about our whole lives lived in God's ways rather than from our own, or our society's, agendas.

It is for this reason that we need Sabbath. Not simply as space for doing nothing, or stepping out of the rat-race for a day to get our breath back, though we do often need to do that too. Rather, the wholesome observation of the Sabbath is an opportunity to enfold ourselves regularly in the twin poles of our lives – that of God and that of our neighbour – and thus to find our right orientation once again in the life to which God calls us and for which God has created us.

Amen