

## Sabbath

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Revd Rebecca Newland  
Pentecost 14 C, 25 August 2013

*Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17*

Let me read to you the fourth commandment.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For 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)

Keeping this commandment is right at the centre of today's gospel.

Jesus is there in the local synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his weekly custom, and as usual he is teaching. A crippled woman comes in and Jesus heals her before being asked, before being consulted. He just does it, and immediately stirs up the religious authorities because they believe he has again broken the Sabbath commandment to do no work on that holy day. With pure common sense he points the crowd to the better word of God. He reminds them that compassionate justice is part of Sabbath observance. The two are not and can never be separate.

How easily we seem to find it to separate God out from the weightier matters of justice and compassion. How easy is it to misunderstand what the Sabbath is all about?

One of my favorite characters who often gets this spectacularly wrong is the Revd Obadiah Slope, the Bible-believing parson from the Barchester Chronicles, Anthony Trollope's satirical take on the Church of England. He and Mrs Proudie, the power hungry Bishop's wife, are intent upon forcing parishioners to observe the Sabbath. They even want to stop the trains running on a Sunday. While they are busy pursuing their reform agenda, the care and good treatment of God's people is neglected. What the Bible-believing Obadiah doesn't get is that the Sabbath and the love of others are intrinsically linked. Actually Obadiah doesn't even get that the Sabbath is about God. For Revd Slope and Mrs Proudie, it is about their agenda, their striving for power and control, their base desires.

Talking about observing the Sabbath might seem a little old-fashioned in this day and age. The argument about Sunday trading is well and truly over. The Obadiah Slopes of this world never did get the trains to stop running on a Sunday. The pubs open in the morning, the pokie machines go 24 hours a day and public servants now work weekends and any other time they can to get the work done. Working for the man and feeding his coffers has well and truly taken over from Sabbath observance.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that it is still one of the Ten Commandments, the fourth in fact, and our Lord Jesus, being a good and observant Jew, went to the synagogue every Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and remembered his God.

So what is the Sabbath all about?

I could take us back to the account in Genesis when God ceased doing the work of creation on the seventh day, sat back and said, "This is very, very good". God took time to delight in what he had done and delight in the beauty and wonder before him. I could talk about the entomology of the word, which means to cease, to desist, to stop. I could talk about the way

the Sabbath is linked in Exodus with the giving of the manna. There was no reason to work on the Sabbath because the food was already provided. I could talk about the fourth commandment, which clearly states that the Sabbath belongs to God, no one and nothing else but God. On the six other days of the week those who are in a covenant relationship with God can pursue their own interests but just one day a week belongs to God. Or I could talk about how for Christians the Sabbath changed from a Saturday to Sunday because, Sunday, the first day of the Jewish week was the day of the Lord's resurrection, the day of the new creation.

And I could certainly spend some time talking about how we all need to slow down, take time to enjoy creation, and to find some recreation, re-creation and how we need to let the whole environment, God's wondrous creation take a weekly break from feeding our hungry lives.

But I want us to hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah as his words break into our life. Isaiah urges us not to trample the Sabbath, to not pursue our own interests, to not spend time on our own affairs. The Sabbath is instead the Holy Day, belonging to God and we are called to honour it. If we do that Isaiah declares we will have delight, "we will ride upon the heights of the earth" and we will be blessed.

Just to remind ourselves: Isaiah is writing during the Babylonian captivity. The Kingdom of Israel and Judah have been over run and it's people taken away to the land of Babylon, a land of strange Gods and strange people. The temple in Jerusalem, Solomon's temple, is destroyed. So the centre of their common life and their worship is gone. The people are faced with questions of identity and purpose and place. They are also enthralled with the new country and it's opportunities.

It reminds me somewhat of what our globalized world is like. All our movement across borders, many of us have travelled to different countries to find a better life or a different life. Many of us have moved all over the country—that's me. Many of us have had to struggle with problems of place, identity and purpose. And so, as for the ancient Israelites in a strange land, there can be chaos and confusion. The poem by William Yeats echoes this chaos: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". [William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*. 1919.]

It is in the midst of this chaos, despair, confusion and temptation that Isaiah writes. People were finding various ways to cope with their difficulties including a self-righteous and meticulous following of religious laws. Like many minorities under pressure and struggling for survival, they became inward looking and obsessed with detail, unable to let go of the past and afraid to face the future. Isaiah and the word he preached breaks into this world. Isaiah drags their eyes away from the detail and points them to the one and only source of their true identity and purpose—God. In chapter 45 verse 5 God speaks through Isaiah, "I am The Lord, there is no other". In the midst of chaos, Isaiah gives the Hebrews a life-giving centre.

But it is a centre where the being of God is also the centre of justice and mercy. The Sabbath, that one day a week, is our chance to come back to centre, to find God again and to be reminded that our identity, our purpose and our place is in and with God. I don't know what your week is like; I know my week is full to bursting of complex demands, confusion, successes and failures. It can feel very chaotic. As I keep up to date with the election news, it can also feel as if I am living in a very strange land where common decency, truthfulness, compassion and understanding have completely disappeared and I despair. Yet we have this gift, this idea from God, that can reorient us and give us hope, the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is not a law for God, but for us. God doesn't need us to turn up on a Sunday. God wants us to turn up so we can find the centre, so we can be recreated, so we can be

refreshed and fed and healed as we gather around the Lord's Table. At the heart of the Sabbath is God's great love for us.

The Sabbath is part of God reminding us of how much we are loved by God and maybe even each other. In chapter 43 verse 4 of Isaiah we hear God explain why he has done so much for his people. God says, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

I'll say it again: hear God say it to you ... "You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you".

In the Eucharist, our Sabbath feast, we find again the greatest example of God's love for us, in that in Jesus Christ this love died for us and invites us into a new creation of compassion, forgiveness and peace. As our sentence from Hebrews puts it, we come to "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

We are reminded, in this ritual and in the words of the prophet, that the Sabbath and sacrificial love of others go hand in hand. Just as Jesus modeled in that synagogue in Galilee long ago we hear again that worship of God and the care of others is intrinsically linked, for we are to love the Lord our God with all heart, soul, mind and strength—especially on a the Sabbath—and our neighbors as ourselves.

May the Sabbath of God bless you and others.

*Creator God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you: teach us to offer ourselves to your service, that here we may have your peace, and in the world to come may see you face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*