

Proper 16 Yr C

The seventh day of the Jewish week is the Sabbath, which is made holy by the worship of God and by complete abstinence from work. It was the day on which the Lord rested from his labours on the six days of creation. In this way, it might be understood that there is something God-given in the idea of rest. Just as work is holy, so also rest from work is also holy - a gift from God and something to be treasured and enjoyed. The principle seems utterly simple and straightforward.

It is strange, then, to report that there is something unique in the degree to which the peoples of this island and those who took the cultures of this island to far-flung corners of the earth have fought over the observance of the Sabbath. What has come to be known as Sabbatarianism, that is, an excessive strictness in the observance of this day of rest, is a peculiar development of the English and Scottish

Reformation, being unknown in the rest of Europe even among strict Calvinists. Under the influence of the Sabbatarians, the idea of enjoyment or recreation having a place in the observance of the Sabbath became anathema. Is there something peculiar to the British character which makes enjoyment of the Sabbath seem immoral? One account of such a strict nineteenth-century American Sunday that I read about in my childhood has never left me. It comes from *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder:

After dinner Eliza Jane and Alice did the dishes, but Father and Mother and Royal and Almanzo did nothing at all. The whole afternoon they sat in the drowsy warm dining-room. Mother read the Bible and Eliza Jane read a book, and Father's head nodded till he woke with a jerk, and then it began to nod again. Royal fingered the wooden chain that he could not whittle, and Alice looked for a long time out of the window. But Almanzo just sat. He had to. He was not allowed to do anything else, for Sunday was not a day for working or playing. It was a day for going to church and for sitting still.

In other words, it was for the ten-year old boy from whose perspective the book was written sheer torture.

For centuries the idea of 'keeping Sunday special' has been a potent political football. When in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the strict Puritan approach to Sabbath keeping really began to bite, King James I attempted to fight back against this tendency by issuing in 1619 his Book of Sports, insisting on the importance of stopping work but also encouraging lawful recreation such as archery and dancing. He struck at the heart of Sabbatarianism by instructing all ministers to read the book from the pulpit. When Charles I reissued the book in 1633, he actually deprived all clergy who refused to publish it. The Book was emblematic of the cultural and political civil war in Britain at the time, and the Puritan Parliament had its revenge when it had the Book of Sports publicly burned in 1643.

The debate in the 1990s over Sunday trading was the latest, and perhaps the last, of our public debates over this issue. With Christianity a minority interest in the country, the idea that

a particular approach to the observance of the Christian Sabbath should be enjoined on the whole population seems out of touch with reality.

People resenting constraints on their enjoyment of the weekend is hardly likely to make them more devout.

If the Sabbath is no longer for most people a day for God, nevertheless we have not lost sight of the value of a day for rest, for relaxation, for recreation. We know, at least in principle, that having time to recharge our batteries is a good, indeed a necessary thing for us. It is one of those many ways in which the values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition continue to underpin the assumptions of our society in ways we don't always recognise. Sabbatarianism, on the other hand, seems to me a fundamentally negative impulse - that in order to honour the Lord's Day we have to deny ourselves the enjoyments and pleasures that are part and parcel of the goodness of the life that God has given to us. What strikes me about that account of a

nineteenth-century American Sunday that I read to you is its essentially passivity. People were expected to respond to the gift of God's goodness and rest by doing nothing at all.

Jesus, on the other hand, in our gospel for today understands the gift of the Sabbath in terms of liberation, of the setting free of those who are bound. In the synagogue on the Sabbath he heals a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years, telling her 'You are set free from your ailment' and laying his hands on her. In this action, he makes several points simultaneously.

He makes a point against those, like the leader of the synagogue, who we might call the Sabbatarians in his own community. They see the healing that Jesus does as work, as if his gift of healing were a kind of job that he does 9 to 5 during the week rather than a revelation of the power of God working through him. Their view of the Sabbath is essentially reactive and negative, as if God were honoured by the absence of

everything that people do in the rest of the week.

Jesus, on the other hand, sees the Sabbath not as a negation of the rest of life but as a sign of the divine fullness of life, the life of the Garden of Eden lost by Adam and Eve but to which God seeks to restore his people. Because Adam and Eve had fallen prey to the wiles of Satan, humanity was bound to the captivity of labour by the sweat of their brows. Jesus proclaims that God's will is to restore his people to that fullness of life of which the Sabbath is the sign. By setting free this woman from her bondage in captivity to Satan, he gives a sign of the destiny that God intends for all his people.

In so doing, Jesus also points to the new Sabbath that is the day of his resurrection. Sunday, the Lord's Day, becomes the Christian Sabbath because it is the day on which God in Christ frees all people for all time from bondage to sin and death. It is his pledge of our new

creation, the day on which heaven is brought down to earth, and earth is reunited with heaven. Even while we travail in the midst of our mortal life, we receive tokens of the promise of our redemption. Eternity realized as Christ's Body and Blood under the forms of bread and wine nourish us and strengthen us in the eternal life of God. This should not be the cause of passivity and inertia. We should be responding with praise and thanksgiving, as participants in a festival that speaks to us of the eternal banquet of rejoicing that is the life of the kingdom of God.

It is precisely here that our secular Sabbath, the weekend, lets us down. Fundamentally this time is about recreation, about enjoying ourselves amidst the pleasures of this world in and of themselves. But recreation can and should be about much more than this. We need to go back to the roots of the word, to the re-creation that God offers to us and to all his people in Christ. The Sabbath is not fundamentally about what we do to enjoy ourselves. It is about the new and

perfect life to which God calls us, that life that is the fulfilment of our true humanity, the fulfilment of all that is good and loving and true in our human nature.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the holy mysteries of the Eucharist. When the bread and the wine have become the Body and Blood of Christ, we will pray the Lord's Prayer on the Lord's Day. When we pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread', we will be asking not for the ordinary bread which sustains our daily life, but for the bread of God's own day, the bread of God's kingdom and of his divine presence. Let us eat this divine bread rejoicing in the knowledge that we share in the feast of the eternal Sabbath of the Lord and that by it we are renewed in the eternal life that God has prepared for us from all time and eternity. Glory and praise be to Him for ever and ever. Amen.