

## Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Trinity: Take a Rest!

Hebrews 12: 18 – 24

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire: to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear”.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the Spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Luke. 13: 10 - 17

10 On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, 11 and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ 13 Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

14 Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, ‘There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.’

15 The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? 16 Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’ 17 When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

One might wonder how it is possible to object to the healing of a woman crippled for eighteen years just because it is the Sabbath, yet as we heard in our gospel reading the leader of the synagogue in response to this healing objected, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.'

He made his objection not to Jesus but to the crowd, still Jesus addresses him, and those who share his opinion, with blunt directness, 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman... be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?'

So why would the Leader of the Synagogue object to the healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath? What was he thinking of?

It is probably worth noting that the write up of this incident is done by Luke from information given to him by eye witnesses who were a part of the early Church, and neither Luke nor any of his sources are going to be particularly well disposed towards Leaders of Synagogues, not least because at the time Luke's gospel was being compiled Christians were being opposed by the Jewish authorities. It is also worth recognising that the Leader of the Synagogue is not just being plain mean, there is a genuine religious view point behind his objection, although of course he too had partisan motivations.

In the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses number five is 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.' This is a good commandment, Sabbath roughly translates as 'take a rest', if people work constantly they become ill and the quality of their work actually declines, so for every one's sake – take a rest.

The Leader of the Synagogue, however, has taken things a step further. He has decided that healing constitutes work and therefore should not be done on the Sabbath. In fact he, and the generations of religious scholars before him, had taken things several steps further; a commandment given by God to enhance life is being enforced by the religious elite as a law actually restrictive of life.

Out of His wisdom God has given commandment designed to enable human flourishing, and ignoring that command brings its own consequences. But here's the twist, when religious elites get hold of the command the meaning becomes not that observing the law is life enhancing, and breaking it an act of foolishness, but rather that God will punish you if you break His law. Worse than that, the religious elite's understanding of the law is presented as if it is God's actual law to be enforced by any means.

The inspiration of God can become twisted by religion, instead of holiness meaning a fulfilling and abundant life, holiness comes to mean living in fear of breaking God's rules and incurring His wrath.

Which mountain are you worshipping on? The one with Moses burning with fire, and darkness, gloom and storm? Or the one with thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven. To law and judgement, or to love and grace?

Put simply, if on a Sunday you fall asleep at the wheel of your car and crash, it is not divine punishment for breaking the Sabbath, you should have taken a rest.

There is an even further ramping up of this religion as more and more man-made commentary is added to God's commandments. I say 'man made' not out of disregard for modern inclusive language but because historically religious elites have been male, these religious elites expand the commandments into great volumes of religious laws that govern all aspects of life. We shall have to see if women do better than that now they can be Bishops...?

So, first let's slip 'take a rest' into 'do no work', and then let's define work in a way that is wholly impractical and defies common sense and all compassion, and then hey presto - healing as a form of work is banned by God on the Sabbath. It must be right because it says so in the bible!

Do you know there are such things as Sabbath Elevators? They didn't have elevators in Moses' time, but they do now and so Rabbis have had to decide if pressing buttons in an elevator constitutes work. As some Rabbis have decided that pressing buttons in an elevator constitutes work elevators have been designed that automatically stop at every floor so that the faithful can get home to their apartments on the Sabbath without incurring the wrath of God.

Some Orthodox Jews even object to the use of Sabbath Elevators because on the downward bound elevator your weight adds to the downward force and motion of the elevator and so consequently you are working. In order to observe the Sabbath command to 'take a rest' some Orthodox Jews choose to take the stairs instead of the elevator.

This is not just a problem for Jews, I recall a conversation I had with an Imam, the Mosque had arranged for an Imam from Pakistan to cover his holiday leave but when he returned from his holiday he found an angry congregation who said 'why did you not tell us that television was haram ( that is banned ).' Apparently, this Imam from Pakistan had been outraged to find the congregation had televisions and had ordered them to get rid of them. The Imam patiently explained to his congregation that televisions were in fact halal (allowed) and so gradually they repurchased televisions. The next year when he went on holiday they hired the same Pakistani Imam to cover his leave, and when he returned home he found once more that televisions had been thrown out. He said that he managed once more to persuade people that televisions were in fact halal, but that he began to wonder if someone on the Mosque management committee owned a television shop and was making a profit from it all.

Lest we get too self-satisfied and assume that this is a problem for other religions not ours, think of those Christians who according to their moral preconceptions cherry pick Old Testament Laws and New Testament writings in order to build a new religious law code, and threaten anyone who disagrees with hell. Or let me remind you that the dear old Church of England has five hundred years' worth of Canon Law on it's books ready to govern and regulate our every activity in church.

The difficulty is not law in itself, law is a good thing, it enables us to live together, nor is religion the problem— religion is just how we work out our faith together, nor is it Sabbath observance that is the problem, the problem is our very human tendency to lose sight of our original inspiration.

It can happen to anyone.

Consider a newly married couple who are very much in love. Out of concern that their busy working schedule might mean they do not see each other often enough they decide to have a night out together once a week. The idea is to keep their love alive, and to enjoy each other's company. The years pass, and life changes, a baby or two comes along, what if they can't get a baby sitter? What if one of them has to go away with work, or if one of them is ill? Do they still keep to their plan of having a night out? They might begin to think that their love depends on observing their weekly night together, and so struggle back from being away with work, or still go even if one or both is ill, or settle for a dubious baby sitter. So both are tense on the night out, it has become a burden, they are tired and end up arguing on the very night set aside for their relationship to flourish, they feel guilt if one of them has to cancel, or resentment if the other cancels.

What has gone wrong?

Law has replaced relationship as the basis of their time together.

Jesus said, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'

Religion inspired by Jesus is about being set free, just like the crippled woman that he healed in our gospel story, set free from the things that bind us, that rob us of life, it is about abundant life not abundant law.

So receive God's healing and forgiveness on this Sabbath day, and live in the abundant eternal life that God gives to all who are willing to receive it.

Amen.