



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Tenth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Isaiah 58.9b-14](#), [Hebrews 12.18-29](#), [Luke 13.10-17](#)

21 August 2022

In the Gospel reading, it's the sabbath and Jesus is following the religious tradition within which he has been brought up. Observing the sabbath is enshrined in the Jewish law. It's the fourth of the ten commandments given to Moses and it instructs people to remember the sabbath and keep it holy. To help people work out what it means to keep it holy, the different religious parties created many rules that outlined exactly what sabbath observance meant, what you were allowed to do and what was forbidden. The Talmudic rabbis listed 39 major categories of prohibited work and even many basic everyday activities were banned such as baking, cooking, travelling, gathering wood, bullying, selling. The idea of sabbath was unique to the nation of Israel and was a key, way in which people remembered their connection to God. All Jews were expected to keep the sabbath every seventh day and that meant observing the sabbath laws, worshipping throughout the day and studying.

As a practicing Jew, Jesus is observing sabbath and he has gone to the synagogue. Since he is a guest and recognised religious teacher, he is invited to speak as was customary and normal practice.

While he is speaking, his attention is drawn to a woman who we are told has been crippled for 18 years and is bent over and quite unable to stand up straight. We have no reason to believe that Jesus knew how long she had been afflicted for when he first saw her – it is likely he or one of the disciples had a conversation with her and got to know her although Luke doesn't record all their communication for us, he edits it down to the key point.

When Jesus sees her need, his heart goes out to her, and he wants to help. It is likely that she has been ostracized as people clearly believe her affliction is caused by a spirit and at that point in time illness or deformity was often believed to be caused by sin. So, Jesus not only sees her, he calls her over, speaks to her, lays his hands on her and heals her. His approach demonstrates how much more important the person in difficulty is than anything else. Jesus halted the worship of the synagogue to attend to her. He didn't carry on and make her wait until the service was finished, he stopped and attended to her first, on the sabbath.

Jesus' actions result in her praising God, he enables her to worship more freely as she experiences more deeply than before the reality that she is known and loved by God. Her healing because an act of salvation as she becomes more whole and receives God's shalom.

The synagogue leader however is full of righteous indignation. How dare Jesus break the sabbath laws and 'work' by bringing healing on the sabbath – why couldn't he wait until tomorrow and come back then. Jesus is not impressed to say the least. 'You hypocrites!' He points out that they look after their animals and ensure they have food and water on the sabbath and stresses how much more important this woman is than their animals. That comment shames them as they probably think their animals are more important than an unknown woman.

God created sabbath to be a gift and a blessing to us. To offer us a break from the ordinary rhythm, routines and burdens of the working week. To ensure we have time and space for a more relaxed rhythm and the opportunity to spend time being with God, offering our praise and worship, learning more about our faith and committing ourselves to living within God's covenantal relationship.

As the writer to Hebrews puts it, sabbath is meant to be an opportunity for us to remember that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken and for us to show gratitude by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe. As Christians we are called to faithful living, that means we are asked to be obedient to God but working out what that looks like in practice isn't easy.

Sabbath was always meant to be an opportunity for us to rest in God's presence. A day where we were free of the constraints of work so that we could focus our attention on God. Worship, spend time with the family of believers, learn more about our faith and rest. I wonder if that characterizes how we choose to use Sunday?

It is tempting for those of us who are working Christians to seek to have two days off a week – two days to relax, rest and do whatever we like. It is good to take time off and to rest, God models that in creation – the concept of six days of work and creation and a seventh day to rest and enjoy the fruits of labour. But it is also good to honour sabbath – devoting time to God creating space to build our relationship with God, to be with God, to worship to connect with the community of believers and to grow in our faith. The concept of a weekend allows space for both of those things which is good for us.

God asks us to make a commitment to him – to offer him time and our undivided attention. To commit ourselves to worship and to gathering with our congregation. But for our sabbath to be holy and righteous, we need to ensure our whole lives are holy – set apart and dedicated to God. Part of sabbath observance is that the sabbath themes run through every day.

As Isaiah puts it we are called to live lives where we 'remove the yoke from among us, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil' – and as we seek to remove injustice and avoid sin we consciously focus on living lives of justice and compassion 'offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted'. When we live like that our light rises in the darkness.

God's promise to us is that as we seek to live faithfully a life that is holy and dedicated to God the Lord will guide us continually, satisfy our needs, make our bones strong and repair those things that are damaged.

As we pursue sabbath and actively seek to be attentive to God, spending a day when we focus on dwelling in God's presence and offer worship that is a living sacrifice and that is holy, acceptable, reverent and filled with awe then we learn to delight in the Lord and our love for God grows and God blesses us and we become a blessing to others.

The Jewish tradition wanted to be faithful and obedient and that led to the creation of myriad minor rules and regulations to ensure law-keeping. They tried to create a situation where there was no need for moral choices and ethical decisions to be made because they created rules and regulations covering as many situations as they could imagine.

There is still an ethical tradition that works in this way today – it's called deontology or Kantianism and it is based upon the premise of adhering to duties and obligations when making decisions. The problem with this is that the rule makers can never imagine every possible scenarios. We know there are always exceptions that break every rule. The kind of thinking that wants to focus on keeping laws, rules and regulations is often based upon an understanding of God as Lord, King, ruler and judge, the one who always knows best and must be obeyed. But we know that alongside those things God also reveals himself as love,

mother, servant, friend for example. The God who loves each one of us as if there was only one of us and who suffers in our place and lays down his life for our wellbeing.

This passage challenges us to consider our sabbath practice – do we honour God by devoting time and space to him and to worship and to belonging to the fellowship of faith. But Jesus' words and actions don't only apply to sabbath and the keeping of sabbath rules and observance. Jesus models a different ethical approach to that of Kantianism or deontology.

Jesus shows in his actions another way to live ethically and obediently. Jesus acts altruistically. He risks his own reputation and is willing to be considered a law breaker because of his selfless desire to benefit others. Jesus demonstrates that the over-riding law, the trump card as it were, is love. God is love and cannot act in an unloving way. This passage does far more than challenge our keeping of sabbath - it challenges our priorities and all our decision-making.

Do we seek to be bound by rules or can we have flexible thinking that enables us to see the needs of others and give priority to the rule of what is loving in the decisions that make. Are we willing to challenge the norm, go against expectations, break rules when we know that doing so would aid others and show them they are known and loved by God? It can't possibly be right to break every rule – but in certain situations Jesus demonstrates that is the right thing.

We all make hundreds of decisions every day and our lives are surrounded by rules of all kinds – when we come across rules or notice our thinking is rule-based, when we use words like should or ought or must, then Jesus challenges us to think again and double check – what is the truly loving thing to do in this situation and commit to doing that. Then we are truly worshipping God with reverence and awe.