

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 10th Sunday after Trinity – 21st August 2022

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Our gospel reading this morning about Jesus healing the woman on a sabbath, and the criticism and outrage this caused, reminded me of something David said a few years ago. When challenged by people about preaching on a Sunday, because that is work, he replied “No, it isn’t. I work in the week, preparing my sermon and the services I take so that when it comes to Sunday I’m not working, but worshipping.” There was no answer to that!

But why was it such a problem in Luke’s account? All Jesus did was say to her that she was healed, and touch her. It wasn’t a four hour operation or anything strenuous by the sound of it. So why was the leader of the synagogue so upset about it? Surely he should have been happy that after 18 years of pain and misery this poor lady was able to stand up straight. Or was he jealous because this happened so easily and quickly when he had not been able to do anything at all for her?

Let’s go back to the beginning, to the 10 commandments in Exodus. Here we find the fourth commandment which was given to the Jews and which has been passed down to us over the centuries. It’s one of the longest. “Remember to observe the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh is a Sabbath Day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no-one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them, but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.”

So there we have it – no work, because it is a holy day. In fact for the Jews it’s the holiest day of all. It begins on Friday evening with the lighting of candles, prayers

and a special meal, and closes at sunset on Saturday after two more special meals, prayers and attendance at the synagogue. You wear your best clothes and generally honour the day.

A lot of this passed on to Christianity, albeit on a Sunday.

All so far so good – but what exactly is work? This is where things get complicated as over the generations, work was defined in detail in Jewish law and it prohibited any form of work unless an urgent human or medical need is life-threatening. The 39 categories covered the usual types of work in those days – ploughing, sowing, reaping, preparing grain for baking, wool from shearing to weaving, killing animals and tanning their hides for leather, writing, building, making and putting out a fire, moving things around and so on. In addition, the rabbis added more and more. They believed that if every Jew observed the Sabbath on two consecutive occasions the Messiah would come. And so it got more and more defined and restrictive. What began as a relatively simple commandment of keep the day holy, spend it in rest and communication with God, became hedged about with all manner of petty rules. Backed up by the severest of punishment – death by stoning for transgressors.

So the rabbis and synagogue leader, immersed in all this, would have been shocked to see Jesus doing what they considered to be work – after all, if this woman has been ill for 18 years it's hardly a life threatening emergency and she should have come on any of the other six days of the week. It doesn't seem to have occurred to them that they had just witnessed a miracle – God's power at work, right there and then. How many people would they have seen healed like that regardless of the day of the week?

What better way of making her day special than of healing her? Imagine being able to stand up straight and be free of pain, after 18 years of suffering. Especially as it was considered that she was possessed by an evil spirit, making her an outcast, an object of ridicule. Evil spirits belong to Satan – as Jesus points out, this woman is a daughter of Abraham who has been bound by the Satan for 18 years. What better day to release her than the Sabbath, the holiest day of the week? Jesus knows as well as they do what the law permitted and what it didn't – the rabbis themselves would have thought nothing of watering their stock and untying them to do so, therefore why shouldn't Jesus untie this poor soul and let her find relief?

It's a power struggle going on – the synagogue leader has been well and truly upstaged and doesn't like it. But for Jesus, this poor crippled lady represents also the whole of Israel, bent double and needing to be untied from the grip of Satan by his kingdom message. It's what he is on his way to do. So he has no problem in calling his critics hypocrites, and holding a mirror up to their actions and their petty-mindedness. So absorbed in manmade restrictions they had no pity.

Perhaps our society today has much to learn from this. We have moved forwards - or have we? How many of us really do observe the fourth commandment? Do we put on our best clothes, give thanks to God for what we have, spend time in prayer and stop doing our usual work? Admittedly it gets fuzzy when one is retired, but the point is more about making the day holy, of making a pause in the busyness of our lives, to pay attention to God, making one day out of seven special. It also does us good to rest and recharge our batteries.

We try hard to obey the commandments about murder, idolatry, etc – but I wonder as I look around at people I know, busy working on a Sunday, no different from any other day of the week, if they even know about the fourth commandment. Sunday is used as a chance to catch up ready for another working week, people working long hours in shops and restaurants etc, whether they realise what they are doing? The effect it has on their lives, on their children and loved ones. What will they have gained from it in later years?

Do we use the Sabbath to do some good in the world as Jesus did? Or are we, too, all so tied up in knots about everyday manmade things and manmade rules that we have lost sight of God, that we can't see a miracle when it happens in front of us?

Amen.