

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 1st Sunday after Trinity

2nd June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

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When you hear the word Sabbath, what comes to mind first? Is it the day of holiness and rest observed by Jewish people, a break from the busyness of life, or perhaps a long list of 'don'ts'? You might also think of the Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist tradition of associating Sunday rest and worship with a Christian application of the Sabbath.

As 2024 is an Olympic year, I cannot help but recall the story of the Scottish athlete and Christian missionary Eric Liddell: at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, he won a gold medal in the 400m after refusing to compete in the heats of his favourite race, the 100m, because they were held on a Sunday. Instead, he chose to go and preach at the Scots Kirk.

Whether the concept of Sabbath is new to you or deeply ingrained in your upbringing, we must acknowledge that in today's fast-paced world, the idea of setting aside time for rest and reflection can seem both inviting and elusive. We cannot help but envy a little those who are faithful to such a discipline.

The Jewish Sabbath was and is a completely original institution. In Jesus's day, the Sabbath played a crucial role in establishing Jewish identity both within Palestine and beyond. From sundown on Friday until sunset on Saturday, Jews encouraged one another to enjoy a day of delight¹, worship the LORD², set aside ordinary work³, and engage in battle only in self-defence⁴. Jewish theologians often debated which activities were permissible on the Sabbath, prohibiting 39 actions.

¹ Nehemiah 8:9–12; Isaiah 58:13–14

² Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3

³ Amos 8:5

⁴ 1 Maccabees 2:29–41

It began as a simple observance of the pattern of time that God followed in the creation of the world, according to the book of Genesis: after speaking the world into existence over a six-day period, God rested (*shabat* in Hebrew) on the seventh day, blessed it and set it apart from the other days⁵. However, as we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment was given as a gift to the newly freed Hebrews after their enslavement in Egypt. Even today, the Jewish prayer before and after the Sabbath meal includes the words: ‘Once we were slaves in Egypt, now we are free people.’ The Sabbath thus acknowledges and celebrates God’s redemptive activity and symbolises the commitment to a holy existence as a free people.

Can we grasp how revolutionary this commandment remains, even today? The Sabbath is not only a religious institution, a memorial to Creation, the day on which God himself rested, but, as theologian and philosopher Jonathan Sacks⁶ pointed out, it is also fundamentally a political institution, a tutorial in liberty. One day in seven, master and slave, employer and employee, the migrant, and even animals, are to experience unconditional freedom. On this day, all hierarchies and relationships of power are suspended, and the offer of rest is not based on merit but is an act of divine love and grace. The Sabbath offers a blueprint for human existence: the ordinary week reflects God’s time, with the Sabbath foreshadowing the day when the glory of God will fill the earth and humankind will enter God’s rest. A lesson that holds value even for the secular world, as Czech economist Tomáš Sedláček⁷ argues, encouraging us to create a pause in the relentless pursuit of ‘more’. Such a pause would allow us to celebrate what we have rather than obsess over what we lack.

Doesn’t all this evoke a bit more sympathy for the Pharisees and their insistence on impeccably honouring Sabbath, as even the prophets have decreed: ‘If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day, [...] I will make you ride on the heights of the earth [says the LORD]’⁸. The Church has a long tradition in caricaturing the Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites. Yet, according to the 1st century Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Pharisees were esteemed by their Jewish contemporaries for “practising the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their discourse”⁹. They were regarded as upstanding, devout pillars of the community.

⁵ Genesis 2.2-3

⁶ *Radical Then, Radical Now*

⁷ *The Economics of Good and Evil*

⁸ Isaiah 15.13-14

⁹ *Antiquities*

No, the Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath - they were absolutely right. But rightness alone is not love. Rightness is not compassion. Rightness does not fulfil the law. Time and time again, we see Jesus Christ overturning the rules established for proper observance. Each time he does so, he embodies his words as recorded in the Gospel: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.'¹⁰

What better way than his to understand the purpose of the Sabbath? Hunger being satisfied, ailments being healed – a day of rest and a liberation from the tyranny of our needs, allowing people to remember and know the goodness, generosity and bounty of God.

What does the Pharisees' silence in response to Christ's question reveal? They have constructed a system of traditions and rules and implications of God's good and holy law, but they have lost sight of its true purpose. C.S. Lewis once remarked, "Nothing gives one a more spuriously good conscience than keeping rules, even if there has been a total absence of all real charity and faith."¹¹

How tolerant and loving are we toward those who defy or break the rules to proclaim and witness to God's realm? Toward those who block roadways out of love for God's creation, or protest against violence and injustice? Do we see Christ in their actions, or do we choose law over love, habit over creativity, and rules over compassion? Do we choose these because it is easier than bearing the unruly potency of love?

There is a detail in this story you may have overlooked. The man is healed, yet Jesus neither touched him nor spoke any words of healing. He simply asked the man to stretch out his hand, and the healing occurred. By doing this, Jesus upheld his Sabbath observance, not breaking the law in any way. Instead, Mark portrays Jesus as honouring the purpose of the Sabbath commandment and God's commitment to humanity's flourishing. What if we designated the Sabbath as a time when God reaches out to us and we reach out to God, creating healing and new life through this mutual reaching?

God's law is good - a law of love that aims to bring about life in abundance. In our story, Jesus demonstrates that the Sabbath is indeed the day to celebrate the God who gives life and sets people free. The religiosity of the institution, in its well-meaning concern to guard the things of God, misses the true heart of

¹⁰ Matthew 5.17

¹¹ *Letter to an American Lady*

God. Did you hear the heart of God today? Not calling for ritualised obedience but for heartfelt and compassionate action, for love that heals the sick, for love that sees and attends to the invisible and the untouchable.

Set time aside to remember God our creator and liberator, to remember others created and redeemed by him, and to acknowledge our need - and theirs - for restoration and refreshment. Receive God's gift of rest and pursue life.

Amen.