

“KEEP MY SABBATH”
Mark 2:23 – 3:6; Isaiah 56:2,4

If you've been coming along fairly regularly over the past couple of months, you'll know that we've been looking at our church's vision and seeing how we might give it a sharper focus in some areas. Having taken a good look at *Isaiah 56* we've been thinking about our calling to be **A Place of Welcome** and **A House of Prayer**. In the past few weeks we have started to put in place a few things that fit into that refocussed vision, not least the Tuesday Casserole meal for anyone who needs a hot meal, the Friday “Places of Welcome” initiative with Churches Together, and the newly formed Prayer Ministry Team.

What we're looking at this morning isn't necessarily part of all that, but it does spring out of the words we read in *Isaiah 56* and it's been nagging away at me for a few weeks now. We noticed, didn't we, that the people who are to be welcomed and whom God blesses are those who “*choose what pleases [God]*” (v4), who keep the covenant with God and who do what is right, acting justly in their daily lives. But as God speaks to his people through the prophet Isaiah, there is one thing he seems to emphasise above all others, one thing that seems to be important in terms of the covenant and which is very much part of the doing right and acting with justice that he mentions. The one specific thing that is mentioned – and mentioned twice in these few sentences – is keeping the Sabbath (vv2,4). That struck me as slightly odd. Why is that the distinctive marker of God's people? Why make such a fuss about that?

Well, obviously it is considered to be very important – it wouldn't be included here otherwise. But it's actually pretty important throughout the Old Testament. Indeed, it is still very important for orthodox Jewish people today – as you'll know if you've ever spent time in Stamford Hill or Golders Green. We know that God rested on the seventh day of creation and that he included the keeping of the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments he gave his people through Moses. If you look at the Ten Commandments (*Exodus 20*), you'll notice that it is by far the longest commandment. Just a few chapters later in *Exodus* it is clearly intended to be a sign of God's covenant with his people (*Exodus 31:12,13*) and breaking it is a serious matter (*Numbers 15:32ff*). When Nehemiah sets out his reforms after the people return from exile (*Nehemiah 13*), keeping the Sabbath is seen as part of the new system of social justice he puts in place. And in *Jeremiah 17* it is a key part of the observance of God's people.

In Jesus' time, keeping the Sabbath is still seen as very important – as we can see in the way the Pharisees respond to Jesus in the passage we read from Mark's Gospel just now. But we can also see from Jesus' reply that the people seem to have lost sight of the reason for it. The Sabbath was a complete day's break from the work of the week, and opportunity to rest, to spend time with family and friends, to take a step back from the business and commerce that dominated the rest of the week and a day free of activity imposed by others. It was part of the rhythm of life, an opportunity to recharge the batteries, to reflect, to

relax and to worship. It's part of God's gracious provision for human well-being, built into the creation order and reinforced by the covenant God made with his people: "*The Sabbath was made for man*".

However, it's not really observed in our culture any more, is it? Sunday – the day of rest that has been observed since the time of Jesus, a reminder both of our need for rest and of the resurrection of our Lord – is in many ways like any other day. The shops are open, trade and business continue, there are all kinds of things that we feel we need to do, often in preparation for the next few days of work. It's actually far more noticeable as a day of rest in much of the rest of Europe, despite the apparently more secular culture of, for example, France. Even Christians are sucked into the activity of the day, fitting an hour or so at church into a day of shopping, preparation and catching up on the housework.

Some people, of course, argue strongly that observance of the Sabbath is no longer binding on us. Jesus has done away with all that legalism, we say. We're free to do what we like – free to run ourselves into the ground and profit in any way we can from what's going on around us. I don't suppose many of us would want to organise a stoning party for someone who has spent a few minutes picking up sticks or nipping down the newsagents for a Sunday paper! But I have a nagging feeling that we could still profit by making a complete day of rest part of the distinctive lifestyle of the followers of Jesus Christ. And this morning I want to suggest three reasons for having a go at keeping the Sabbath. Those three reasons are **Proclamatory, Pastoral** and **Prophetic**. (Don't you just love it when you can get three points all beginning with the same letter?)

1. PROCLAMATORY

This is about proclaiming who we are. For the Jewish people of Moses', Jeremiah's, Nehemiah's and Isaiah's day it was a marker of those who were part of the covenant, including the foreigners and eunuchs. It made them stand out in a time when, as far as we can make out, no other cultures kept a similar day of rest, a day observed by everyone when no work was done. And for us today, those who claim to follow Jesus, it is a way of saying that we are somehow distinct, that we have different priorities in a society which is so totally sold out to making money, to commerce and business and trying to get ahead. We are not prepared simply to go with the crowd. We have a freedom to live as God intends. For some Christians that is a clear marker – the Seventh Day Adventists, for example – but for far more of us, Sabbath makes no real difference to us other than, as I've said, spending an hour or so in church. I believe it should.

2. PASTORAL

But this is about far more than simply standing out. I said just now that this about living as God intends. And he intends it for our well-being. God doesn't just give us lots of rules to show who's Boss: as our Creator he knows what is best for us and how we are to get the most out of life. After the time he spent in organising creation, he took a break and he knows that we, creatures made in his image, benefit from a regular break as well. This is about living life – organising your life – according to God's ways, not according to the ways of the gods of this world: Mammon, Mars and Eros – money, sex and power.

It is important that we have a regular day of rest, that it is built into our lives in a regular, rhythmic pattern. God does not want you to work every day. That was never in his plan. God didn't and, as we've said, we are made in his image. He has built it into his plans for this world. There's an episode in *Exodus 16* where God provides manna, a kind of miraculous food for his people when they were making their way through the desert towards the Promised Land. His strict instructions were that each person should harvest only enough for himself and his family each day – it would rot if kept overnight – then no-one could start to profit from it. But at the end of the week, it would keep for two days so that they didn't have to get up and gather it on the Sabbath.

This is part of what God wants so that things work the way he intends, for the good of his creation. And this works best if everyone observes the same day. Of course, we can say that we don't have to keep Sabbath on Saturday or on Sunday: we can all take a day off when it's convenient. Then the trouble is that we find ourselves sucked into that seven day a week economy and the Sabbath goes by the board. If you remember back to the 1980s when the government, in order to follow a particular economic model, were forced to liberalise all kinds of social constraints, including Sunday opening, you may recall the *Keep Sunday Special* campaign, set up to ensure that everyone could profit from a day of rest. I stood on platforms with Lord Graham, who led opposition to the proposal in the Lords, and an official from USDAW, the shop-workers' union, and heard politician after politician offer assurances that liberalising trading laws wouldn't affect a day of rest. No-one would ever be forced to work on Sunday. That didn't last long, did it? – as many of you here this morning can testify. Sunday trading and everything that has grown up around it has made life very difficult for many people.

3. PROPHETIC

Which is why our observance of a Sabbath also has a prophetic function. Walter Brueggemann, the great Old Testament scholar, wrote a book entitled *Sabbath As Resistance*. His thesis goes off in a different direction from mine, but the title sums up what I think I'm suggesting here. To keep the Sabbath today – to order your life in a way that fits in with God's creation purposes, to simply organise things so that you can have a day off to spend with the family, to relax and to worship – is a way of standing up to the powers that want to do away with anything that smacks of a greater story, an overarching narrative with God in it. Our society says that you are at the centre of everything, so just do what you want, express yourself and find fulfilment. Don't worry about others too much. And certainly don't get drawn into the legalism and oppression of religion.

The thing is, what God wants for us is for our best. Keeping the Sabbath is a way of saying that we want to follow him and in so doing we are resisting the tyranny of work in all its forms – and at the same time freeing those whom your shopping or whatever forces to work. You are resisting the tyranny of the urgent, the need to do it all today. Most stuff can wait – and if you take a bit of trouble to organise your life, both in the detail and in the broad sweep and direction of it, you'll get by even better. You are resisting what we might call the "*commodification of life*", the reduction of everything to profit and loss. There's a great bit in *Amos 8:4-6* which was written in the 8th century BC but which could quite easily have been written in the early 21st century AD.

Being prophetic is speaking out and living out what God wants, even (or especially) when it runs counter to everything that is going on around. Keeping the Sabbath is a way of saying, "We want to live as God wants", and in so doing trying to get the very best out of life. Of course, we need the emergency services and that kind of thing to be there – Jesus makes that point in his exchange with the Pharisees (and in *Matthew 12:11*) – but we can still start to live as people who are liberated through what Jesus has done (as we are remembering here this morning) to live a life shaped by God's parameters, a life lived according to his gracious commands.

None of that is easy, I know. It's especially not easy as we have maybe allowed ourselves to get sucked too far into the culture around us. But the whole thing about Jesus and what he has done is about transformation. At least think and pray about your attitude to the Sabbath, to keeping Sunday special, and see if there's anything which you might want to change. You might even find it makes life better for you.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Why was the Sabbath day so important for God's people?
- 2) Are we still bound to keep the Ten Commandments? Should we impose them on others?
- 3) What are the advantages of a day of rest? Should it always be the same day?
- 4) Why do we find it difficult to keep a day of rest? What needs to be done to make it easier?

5) What will you do in response to this?