

SERMON FOR TRINITY 10 | 21.08.22

Isaiah 58: 9b to the end; Hebrews 12: 22-24, 28-29; St Luke 13: 10-17

So, in the light of all we have heard in today's readings about keeping the Sabbath free of work, it seems reasonable to ask: What do you do on a Sunday?

Well, we know what some of us do for part of Sunday because we are here in Church, or are watching this Mass on line: but we also know that is a tiny minority of the population – possibly as low as 3-4% compared with an estimated 40% in 1851. So what is everyone else doing?

It won't come as much of a surprise that in order to make it possible for huge numbers of people to take today off – to be with families and friends, to eat out, go shopping, play sport, go places and generally relax – a vast army of people need to work to enable all that to happen. It was one of the great union arguments of the early 1990s that keeping shops closed on Sundays was not just a kill-joy restriction but a way of stopping often low paid staff being forced to work round the clock to service 'the better off' who could afford to take time away. Some of you may even remember the 'Keep Sunday special' campaign of those days – a strange mix of traditionists in the churches who would quote the Bible passages we heard read this morning, and Trade Unionists wanting to protect their members.

I still remember the 'old Sundays' when everything was shut up; there was a time when even big stores like John Lewis' actually shut on Saturday afternoons too. Towns went quiet and there really wasn't much to do at weekends as a result. And the rules were pretty arbitrary: you could go to a garden centre or a small corner shop and buy newspapers, garden gnomes and bicycle spares on a Sunday but you couldn't buy a Bible, fresh cream from a larger store - or the bike itself!

And all this wasn't all that long ago: I had forgotten that the freeing up of the rules about which shops could open on Sundays was only changed in 1994 – and even then with a few odd restrictions about the hours you can buy alcohol. But there is no doubt that the face of Britain has changed out of all recognition as a result. Many people are having to work weekends – and of course on-line shopping has made the greatest difference of all. There is absolutely no restriction of what can be brought to your door almost 24/7.

Does that, then, make these readings about the Sabbath (for us, largely Sundays) completely out of date? Were the unions wrong to ask serious questions about low paid staff having to work even longer hours? Did the Christian community have legitimate concerns about people getting to Church? Just one conversation from our few days away this week was with a grandmother who was churchwarden of an ancient parish church on the Essex/Suffolk border. In between her explanation for the plastic that covered all the pews that Monday afternoon (she and her colleagues had to use it to remove all the bat droppings twice a week throughout the summer) she bemoaned the fact the fact that so many of the young people in the village played sport on Sunday mornings; with the best will in the world, they were therefore pretty unlikely ever to build a relationship with the local congregation. And the national stats prove her point: Church attendance is a third of what it was in the 1980s.

So what do we do with these readings?

Jesus is out and about and by chance comes across a woman who is desperately crippled. It is a Sabbath and he is in the synagogue but however busy he is, he has time to call her over and restore her to health.

I think this moment is worth a few moments of thought. She has been bent over for eighteen long years, unable to stand up straight. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? But just as she is standing upright for the first time, breathing in the freedom of not being crippled, along comes some petty legalist who goes for the woman in a big way: *There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured and not on the sabbath day...*

Jesus isn't stupid: he knows that the Sabbath rules were put in place for the best of reasons – but if someone is ill or in difficulty, their needs trump anything the law had to say.

And that is exactly the challenge. We all know that it is vital for our well-being that we take time away from work. It is horrifying that the greatest cause of death in middle aged men is not cancer or heart failure as one might expect - but suicide.

Stress from work pressures - and the knock-on effect on people's home lives – are in direct proportion to the inability of so many to leave their day jobs behind – at least for a short time each week, and mobile phones

and instant accessibility all play a part in that. But the idea that the whole community can take the same day off each week is clearly untenable today: the genie is out of the bottle. Silly rules about when shops and sport facilities can open don't begin to answer the problem.

So the work balance issue has moved onto new territory. And it raises a whole series of questions about rules and regulations, work practices and minimum wages – and the wider one about how we can encourage people to do what is best without having to make a law about it – do we only stop using hose pipes in a drought when we are forced to, or do we stop because it is the right thing to do? Do I demand the right to do whatever I want, when I want – whatever the consequences to other people? And what do we do about the tendency to feel that we really ought to be working every hour of the day?

'Sabbath rest' cannot, any longer, mean closing down our shops, or sports facilities and entertainment venues on Sundays. But it has everything to do with making sure everyone has some time off to stand back and be able to dis-engage from their work for a while. It's good for our mental health - and it actually makes us more efficient!

But if that is to be anything more than just 'me time'; if that is going to be something we do with others – then we have to be a lot more flexible and creative. Just as Jesus came out of what he was doing to save the life of the crippled woman, we Christians really do need to find a way to carve out time to be with each other. And if it can't be on Sunday mornings – then when? We need to give that lots more thought.

And we might start by going back to Jesus' meeting with the crippled woman. Because the success of the meeting between these two strangers depended almost entirely on Jesus' attitude. He was busy teaching: wasn't he too busy to bother with her? Didn't he already have a full schedule which couldn't make space for such things? Absolutely not! He leaves the people in the synagogue. And he gives her his full and undivided attention. And it is that which 're-makes' her.

God's way of working means that to function fully we also need to leave space for his peace and his grace. Being together in his presence on a Sunday still has a lot going for it: but if not then – then when?!