

Gift giving is fraught with difficulty, don't you think?

Even buying for children can be a major problem when none I have ever known have been obviously lacking for anything. I am always grateful for the parent who will offer precise suggestions, especially as I found that to be a chore when my own were small.

Tom and I have practically given up giving each other presents because our hobby rooms are already very well stocked ; he ends up being inundated on his birthday with packets of liquorice allsorts and other edible goodies.

However, nothing beats a present which is unexpected and yet completely hits the spot. It is usually something the recipient would never have asked for either perhaps because of cost or perhaps because of a lack of awareness of the pleasure such a thing or activity would bring.

You may wonder why I'm wittering on about presents. Well, our Junior Church Resource book titles today's material – **'the Gift of the Sabbath'** and having just had a moderate success as a present giver, it spoke to me!

We find the idea of the Sabbath as a gift in Exodus when God provides daily manna for the travelling Israelites. On the sixth day, two days' worth is given. Although families have prepped one half of this for the Sabbath as they have been told, they still go out to forage on the seventh morning. God despairs – See, God says, I have given you the Sabbath, now stay at home and rest.

When the Ten Commandments are first given, as recorded in Exodus, the command to: **'Observe the Sabbath Day and Keep it Holy'** reminds the Israelites that God is both the God of Creation and the God of their History. God rests on the 7th day having spent 6 days creating the Universe and God has brought these people out of their captivity in Egypt – the day of rest is to be given to servants and visitors as well as observed by those of the Chosen Race – a privilege that they presumably would not have been afforded when they were slaves and which, you would think, they would be more than usually grateful to enjoy.

The commandments are repeated by Moses, as recorded in Deuteronomy, to the second generation of the escaped Israelites who are those who are actually going to make it into the Promised Land ... Moses, their long-standing mediator with God, is soon to die and he needs to pass on his wisdom before he does.

Skip a few hundred years and the Israelites spend time in exile in Babylon. When they are permitted to return home to Israel, the nation's stories are brought to the fore so that the cultural identity of the group can be re-established. Not unlike the work we see being done now for and by the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australasia and nearer home, in the renewed importance being given to keeping the Welsh language alive.

Keeping the Sabbath with refreshed enthusiasm enabled cultural and scriptural stories to be shared. Although other communities probably also had a day of rest in the working week, the specific crafting and shaping of the day by a faith community would perhaps have helped show a distinctiveness to their neighbours as well as themselves. I think the traditions which a Jewish family might follow today in celebrating the Sabbath would be those which began to be forged at this time.

Moving on through the story of God's people, in the gospels we see Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath taking the opportunity to teach and to engage in debate like the one we heard about this morning as recorded by Luke.

Later, as the first Christians begin to establish their identity, their distinctiveness, they have a different day that they want to celebrate – the day after the Sabbath, the day Jesus rose from the dead. I imagine that would have been quite difficult at first ... those who were from the Jewish fold probably had a full day of rest on Saturday and had to squeeze their Christian observances and worship around a normal working day.

Moving forward to our times, what are we supposed to do with our Sabbath, our Sunday? Those of us here have over the years established a pattern, a routine that sees us in church on many a Sunday morning. That routine was helped because for most of us, it was begun whilst the prevailing Christian culture meant that there wasn't much else on offer on a Sunday.

Our readings this morning give us clues about what our Sabbath should look like. Jesus made it clear that the rules which had become attached to the Hebrew Sabbath had distorted God's purpose and become too restrictive. His argument to justify his healing action is that on the Sabbath, God's work should be done. He says: ***'And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?'***

Isaiah says: ***'If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth'***

I began by talking about gifts. The best gifts usually come from those who know us well and who go to the effort of choosing something that will enhance our lives.

My understanding of God and our relationship with him is that he knows us and loves us from before we even were and that what he wants is for us to seek our forever home with him because that is the best outcome for us. Therefore, it goes without saying that any gift, any word, which we receive from him, is given because he knows that our acceptance of it is going to enhance our life.

If the Sabbath is a gift, what does that mean? If it was chocolate, then it would be meant to be savoured, enjoyed, perhaps even shared. If it was an outfit, then it would mean putting it on, selecting the right accessories and the right occasion to feel good in it. If it was an adventure experience then we would have to prepare ourselves to be ready at the appointed time and we would have to throw ourselves into the challenge, even if we were a bit frightened by it. And so it is for the Sabbath. It is intended that we immerse ourselves in it, prepare ourselves for it and expect to enjoy it.

A gift from God is not given to benefit God, it is given to benefit us – to give us pleasure, enjoyment, enrichment. Most of all, it is a way to draw us closer to the one who loves us more than any other.

Those of us who have already accepted some of God's gifts know that this is what God is about and it is that knowledge that we need to try and communicate to those who haven't yet read the gift card.

Does the Sabbath have to be a Sunday? Well just like a birthday is best celebrated on the day itself, I think the answer is – Sunday is good – it celebrates the God of our history conquering death for our tomorrows and on a pragmatic level, gathering together to rejoice is easier if it's the same day for everyone. But Sunday doesn't work for everybody all of the time.

What is important about the Sabbath, I think, is that it should be a time when we can find more space than on other days to acknowledge gifts from God with praise and thanksgiving and it is a time when the most precious relationship we will ever be honoured to be part of can be grown and brought to maturity. It is a time to engage with God. It's better to move these things of the Sabbath to another day to enjoy the gift than not to unwrap it at all.

So what do we need to say about the Sabbath to those who aren't here with us today? Why is it such a special gift? Well, most of us would recognise a benefit in a temporary turning away from the things that consume our energies day in day out. That is a gift in itself. But there's an even better element to the gift for those who delve further for those who use even just a small part of that day to focus on things spiritual, with a deliberate turning away from pursuing one's own material interests to do that, then the seed that God has planted will have a chance to grow and the delights and rewards of knowing him will surely be the blessing that follows.

It's God's gift. Unwrap it and enjoy it!