

2021-10-17... 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Matthew 12: 1 - 21

Having read the gospel, I thought I would prepare to talk about the Sabbath and what keeping it means in 2021 but somehow, what I thought I was looking for in the books I picked off the shelf wasn't what I found and so isn't where I ended up!

The scriptural source for having a day off all work and coming to church on Sunday is of course the fourth commandment which takes its rationale from the creation story where we are told God created the world in six days and took his rest on the seventh. But then it occurred to me, that I don't actually believe that God created the world in six days So what does that mean about rest on the seventh?

However, clearly over the centuries, for the Jewish and Christian faith communities, it has worked very nicely to have a seventh day when people don't go to work but turn up to church instead because regular contact with the authorised priests keeps the people's faith nice and orthodox.

We are now in a time, though, where we are seeing a demise in church attendance with the change in Sunday trading laws often given as a root reason. Well, it's clearly more complicated than that but personally, I think Sunday trading has as one of its major roots in a GOOD THING The beginnings of an equality in the work domain for women ... this is such a huge change that we haven't worked through some other societal customs that mean we don't yet have a true levelling up ... but one of the knock on effects as we will know is that where there was once weekday time to do domestic chores now more has to be done at the weekend ... including shopping!

So you can see that I moved from looking at what keeping the Sabbath means to what are we going to do about the fact that the other 10,000 residents of Whitchurch aren't here with us this evening!

There are a couple of directions of travel to think about this ... first, we can ask if we should be in church if everyone else isn't. Secondly, we can ask if not church, then where?

To start me off, a good book to pull off my book shelf seemed to be *'Why go to church?'* by Timothy Radcliffe, a Roman Catholic Dominican priest. The book was written at the request of Rowan Williams when he was the Archbishop of Canterbury as his Lent Book in 2009. Radcliffe talks in his introduction about churches reminding us that we are pilgrims, and that we are on the way to our ultimate home in God. Also that they act as a sign that as a Christian community we are not 'nobodies' indistinct from the thousands of other people in our towns, but citizens of the kingdom. And then he concludes that the reason we go to church is to be sent out. We go to breathe in again the breath of the Holy Spirit, to be comforted, in its perhaps original meaning of to be given courage, so that we can go out in the name of Christ to love and serve the world.

A second book I looked at was one of Rowan Williams's own, *'Holy Living'*. He speaks of how contemporary urban living has rendered life homogenous and anonymous. He speaks of how the church and Christian communities have a fine understanding of the benefits of a rhythm of feast and fasting through the year and how through those, the differences we see at different times of our life of opinion and emotions and sense of self can be recognised and celebrated instead of being confusing - this is a valuable skill or, commodity even, to share in an age where being different is often not seen as good.

Some of the newer services we have introduced are examples of where the church can come alongside people. The Memorial services for instance meet people at a particularly sorrowful time, show them it is ok to mourn and also suggests to them a way to do it. And our crib services fit alongside the expectation of those who have spent Advent feasting whilst the church has been fasting and give them a time of contemplation before The Event itself.

One of the 'problems' of church, notes Radcliffe, especially when 'an experience' is what people are looking for, is that it often seems boring: there are few thrilling incidents, even in the occasions of baptism, confirmation, and communion which mark a moment of significant change. He notes that 'our transformation by God's grace is **PTO**

a slow business'. How do we encourage people to understand that slow faith is as good an ethic as slow food or slow fashion ...? Answers on a postcard please!!

But going back to being sent, contrary to what it may feel like sometimes, we spend only the smallest fraction of our lives in church, and we are even more visible to our community when we are outside it. I know we have looked at how to perform this 'living it out' role in Bible studies, as well as it being the main point of most sermons, but perhaps the words of Isaiah applied to Jesus, in our gospel reading* can give us pause for thought. It talks about the Spirit being the guide, the giver of comfort, that is of strength and courage as I proposed earlier. It speaks twice about justice – justice being proclaimed so as to bring it to victory. It implies a nurturing habit so that the weak are not damaged. And although justice is to be proclaimed, is it this that is not to be cried out on the streets? Does it mean that action is better than words? Does it mean focus one's efforts where they will be most effective?

I think you would agree that we believe we have something good to share; we believe we are called to go out of our comfort zone to share it, act beyond what we think are our abilities – we believe this because, if you are like me, we find it scary to think that this is something we should be doing. We hope and pray that the Holy Spirit will live up to its promise and show up so that we can do our bit. Come to think of it, that's not a bad place to start!

And here in Whitchurch and this benefice we have the additional benefit of this amazing church community to work with. The look of the sabbath may have changed for many, even for ourselves from what we remember in the past, but we have heard this evening that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and that's not going to change because it looks a bit different. Thank God!

****'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
¹⁹ He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
²⁰ He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
²¹ And in his name the Gentiles will hope.'***