

1st Sunday after Trinity, 3rd June 2018

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon preached by Ordinand, Sarah Geileskey

Texts: Deuteronomy 5:12-15, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6

I wonder what sprang to mind when you heard the Gospel story this morning? Along with an image from the movie *Gladiator* (more of that later), as I thought about the Pharisees in preparation for this morning, into my head popped an ear-worm that has pretty much been with me ever since — it's from a Bing Crosby musical... I'll save you my karaoke version, but you may be familiar the words *'busy doing nothing, working the whole day through, trying to find lots of things not to do'*.¹

Perhaps thinking about the Pharisees busying themselves in that way is a bit harsh. But let's bear in mind that at this point the Jewish people have been under attack for sometime.... perhaps there's a sense of being on the back foot, many of them are dispersed and their hard won territory has been increasingly over run by incomers... the Greeks and then Romans... and now, Mark's gospel tells us, Jesus has been commanding such attention that he can 'no longer go into a town openly' [Mk1:45].

And although himself a Jew, seemingly Jesus' ways are not their ways², and in the face of this new threat, we find the Pharisees, somewhat ironically on the sabbath, working hard to uphold the law in order to preserve and to protect their own identity, their own practices and their own traditions.

Just look at the exchange between Jesus and the pharisees, the conflict that we see between them: the sabbath was made for humankind... says Jesus.... yet the Pharisees' choice of words here seems to imply that humankind was made to observe the sabbath.

Did you notice how the Pharisees metaphorically retreat to a safe distance, standing firmly behind what they know, what they are familiar with...? In this case, it's the law. From what they perceive to be a position of strength, a safe place, they feel like they're on solid ground, the Pharisees are very quick to point out that the behaviour of Jesus' disciples is simply not good enough — that's not what the sabbath looks like, they seem to be saying, 'rules is

¹ "Yankee in Connecticut"

² Jesus commands unclean spirits [Mk 1:27, Mk 1:39], Mk 1:41], Jesus' authoritative teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum [Mk1:21-22], Jesus heals [Mk1:31-34, 2:11], shares table-fellowship (eats) with tax collectors and sinners [Mk 2:16]

rules', that's not how it's done, that's not how we do things round here... passing judgement as they take their authority from the law, their tradition and the clear instructions in the ten commandments — for the Pharisees, who are busy working hard to ensure others are finding *lots of things not to do*, sabbath is a time to rest and a time to remember.

And yes, it can be an enormous relief, can't it... to put our feet up and to rest for a while.

For some of us it is easy to remember a time when the shops were closed on a Sunday and going to Church was meticulously planned around the timing of the Sunday roast. Maybe it still is?! I recall a friend telling me that as a child, she was not allowed to use her coloured pencils on a Sunday, for fear it might distract her from the things of God.

I am sure that some of our activities become distractions to us and it seems to me that being distracted from the things of God is what is happening to the Pharisees in our story.

Their minds are so busy, their purpose so intent, they are so focussed on the task in hand that they literally cannot see what is happening right in front of them... by reminding them of the way in which David saw the needs of his companions, Jesus is pointing out that the rules were intentionally broken — that David chose to draw closer to the presence of God before taking the bread to feed the hungry....

Neither do the Pharisees see the parallel with the needs of the man with the withered hand — Jesus is pointing to his divinity: he doesn't do anything as such... but by simply speaking the word, the man is restored — the very presence of God is drawing closer to that man in his moment of need as the former rules, the old ways are beginning to be re-written, re-imagined, re-purposed.

Sabbath or not, at times of need, humankind draws close to the presence of God... in Jesus, the presence of God draws close to the needs of humankind.

In Exodus chapter 31, the Lord says to Moses *“you shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign [...] given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.”*

We know there is much in our lives and in our world to be distracted by.³

So, yes, sabbaths (plural!) have partly to be about retreat and withdrawal, but not withdrawing to our entrenched lines or retreating into our safe places as we inwardly attend to the clay jars in which our treasure is stored. We are to intentionally retreat from all that distracts us, to intentionally dwell in the divine presence of God, where yes, we rest... and we remember... but where we also reflect... and where we might find time and space to notice the closeness of God's presence that is already and always with us; a presence that reorders us and our sabbath response — that by God's presence with us, our presence in the world might be a light to others, making visible the treasure found in fragile clay jars.

It seems to me that God's presence is about seven whole days, not one in seven, Sabbaths cannot just be about dutifully carrying out Sunday activities in this place where the treasure is seen only by those of us who are here. If sabbath rhythms are energising, not exhausting, we flourish, both as individuals and as a community. Why not, then, make sabbath our practice every seven minutes, seven hours, seven days, seven months and seven years. It's about regularly practising the habit of withdrawing from the distractions, remembering the ways of God, resting in God's presence and allowing God to re-order our thoughts and actions, that we, those around us and all of creation might become all that God has created us to be.

For the last six months, during our worship we have enjoyed the re-telling of God's story — from the promise of hope found in Advent, through Christmas & Epiphany in December and January, Lent in February and March, an April Easter, Ascension and Pentecost in May and now, on the first Sunday in June, we find ourselves at the start of the seventh month of the Church year, there's almost an audible intake of breath.... 'phew'... all those festivals... it is finished.... we have remembered... and retold God's story and now, as a community, we find ourselves pausing, resting and remembering for just a little while longer...

³ Ex 31:13

Definition of Sanctify in Google dictionary:

set apart as or declare holy; consecrate.

"a small shrine was built to sanctify the site"

synonyms: *consecrate, make holy, make sacred, bless, hallow, set apart, dedicate to God, anoint, ordain, canonize, beatify*

"a small shrine was built to sanctify the site"

make legitimate or binding by a religious ceremony."their love is sanctified by the sacrament of marriage"

synonyms: *approve, sanction, give the stamp of approval to, underwrite, condone, justify, vindicate, endorse, support, back, ratify, confirm, warrant, permit, allow, accredit, authorize, legitimize, legitimize* "we must not sanctify this outrageous state of affairs"

free from sin; purify."may God sanctify his soul"

synonyms: *purify, cleanse, free from sin, absolve, unburden, redeem, exculpate, wash someone's sins away; rarelustrate* "they sanctified themselves"

And as we rest in this seventh month... we remember too our seven years with Dean Frances, and we trust in God's provision of our Dean-designate, Canon Joe.

What a sabbath opportunity we have now as the green altar-frontals return and we enter into what the Church calls, ordinary-time..... yet there's nothing ordinary about it — God's extraordinary story has been laid out before each of us: perhaps ordinariness offers us the gift of time and space to respond to all that God's story is stirring within us... "*you shall keep my sabbaths [...] in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you*" and are we ready for this, as individuals? as a community? All of creation?

Let's wonder this week, what sabbatical might look like for all of creation... can we literally 'give the world a break' by being more green?

Let's consider this week, how we regularly withdraw as a community, perhaps to a particular church service or group of people...

Let's look this week for sabbath moments, opportunities for mini-sabbaths, where in the midst of the joys and irritations of everyday life, we momentarily and intentionally turn ourselves over to God... and let's notice how we respond to others in the immediate aftermath.

There's a moving sabbath moment at the start of the film *Gladiator* which I mentioned at the beginning... as I imagined Jesus' disciples weaving their way through the fields of ripe grain. You may be familiar with the image, an arm extended at waist height....a hand gently reaching out, fingers running through the tips of the once green but now golden ears of corn, basking in the sunlight... even the field itself seems to sway gently in the breeze. What has gone before was so hard, but it is finished....what lies ahead may seem impossible, but in this instant, almost a sabbath moment, withdrawn from the world, it's as though time momentarily stands still.

In a world which never stops turning and when our minds rarely stop whirring, as we seek to make 'sabbaths' our regular practice, faithfully holding onto God's sabbath promise of sanctification, it is into this space we make our retreat, in this ordinariness we rest, and in the Eucharist we remember.... as in the presence of God and one another, we, God's treasures, are restored and readied to respond. [Amen]