

As a teenager, I was involved in the “Keep Sunday Special Campaign”. I wrote to my MP, asking him to participate in a debate organised by the Christian Union at my 6th form college. He wrote back to decline the invitation – and quoting the words of Jesus, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath”. This he said meant that a sabbath was for doing what you want – and if you want to do shopping, that’s just fine. Of course, this is not what Jesus meant at all when he said this. He was in fact quoting a very well known Jewish saying, used exclusively by people who kept the commandments including the commandment to keep one day in 7 for rest. For them it wasn’t saying that people could do what they liked on the Sabbath – but about saying that while sometimes it was hard to organise themselves not to work or to miss out on possible income, it was ultimately good for people. I’ve been doing a bit of personal research on Sabbath this year and I was really struck by finding these words in the book of Leviticus,

You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. It is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. (Chapters 16 and 23 on the Great Festivals)

So keeping Sabbath rest is not supposed to be easy, but it is a delight – a bit like the very best Christmases. Hard to prepare for, but full of joy, laughter, love and refreshment. Sabbath for Jews including Jesus was not an empty day when you couldn’t do things – it wasn’t about regulations, dreariness and boredom. It was a full day – full of the love of God, full of hospitality and celebration. There are two great themes of the Sabbath celebration

The first is to remember God’s rest at the end of his creation

Sabbath is about stopping creating – and letting the things we have made bless us. What is forbidden on Sabbath is “melachah” – this is a Hebrew word which means the kind of work which involves creating, ruling or controlling. In other words, it is not ordinary work that is forbidden – it is not to do with the amount of effort. It is that on one day a week, and we do as little as possible to organise and control our lives. “It is the one day when the only thing you must do, is not to do the things you must”. This helps us to remember that ultimately God provides. We imitate God in order to remember that we are not God.

The second great theme of Sabbath celebration is the story of freedom. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, they could not rest. Entering the Promised Land was like a Sabbath rest after all their wanderings. So keeping Sabbath is a sign of freedom. This is what Jesus was getting at when he explained why he healed a woman on the Sabbath. No one he reminds them would keep even a donkey from refreshment on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is about refreshment, rest and freedom. There could be no better day on which to free this dear lady from her illness. And actually freeing her is a sign of what Jesus wants to do for the world – to set us free from our bondage to illness, decay, selfishness.

The passage from the letter to the Hebrews is written to Jews to whom all this about Sabbath would be second nature. It uses these great Sabbath themes which they understood so well to tell them about eternal life. The story of freedom from slavery in Egypt. Some of the Israelites didn’t get to the promised land and stayed wandering in the wilderness... but most of them did get there. However, Psalm 95 says to people “Don’t harden your hearts like they did” – Why did the psalmist write this when the people had already entered the rest of the promised land? Because says Hebrews, he knows there is an even greater better Sabbath to come – eternal life will be like a new creation, it will be perfect rest and refreshment, the perfect freedom which Jesus came to give.

Summary

1. The commandment to take Sabbath rest one day in seven is still relevant today, even though it takes some effort. The two great themes of Sabbath are really important in our generation.
 - i) Creation – we imitate God in order that we may remember that we are not God.
 - ii) Freedom – we rest in order that we may not find ourselves enslaved – we are not to be workaholics or shopaholics or to our own efforts and desires.

Sabbath prepares us for eternity when all will be rest, joy and freedom in Jesus.