

Sunday 2 June – First Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

If you gather a group of people together and ask them which of the ten commandments they still think are relevant to us today, the one that usually comes at the bottom of the list is the one about keeping the sabbath day holy. Many of us are old enough to remember when there was something distinctive about the sabbath – no longer the Jewish sabbath, of course, but Sunday, the day set aside by generations of Christians for the worship of God. Shops were closed, most people didn't go to work, pubs had shorter opening hours, there wasn't much you could do on a Sunday other than go to church.

For many people today, Sunday has lost its distinctiveness. While Tiptree is still fairly quiet on a Sunday and most of the shops stay closed, it is the exception rather than the norm. Supermarkets, pubs, restaurants and leisure facilities are all open. Trains and buses run, albeit less frequently. Some planned medical procedures now happen on Sundays. Most people think nothing of going shopping or going out for a meal on a Sunday. Very few people go to church and even fewer go more than once. The Pharisees would be horrified.

There is something almost comedic about the Pharisees in Mark's account, who seem to be following Jesus around on the sabbath waiting for him to do something wrong. Jesus and his disciples are walking through a cornfield. There are, of course, rules about how far you can walk on the sabbath, but that doesn't seem to be the issue here. The disciples are feeling a bit peckish, so they start plucking grain to eat. It isn't clear whose cornfield this is. We might think helping yourself to someone else's crops constitutes theft, but again that isn't what upsets the Pharisees. In fact, Deuteronomy allows you to help yourself to grain from someone else's field if you are hungry, provided you only use your hands, not any harvesting tools. The law does forbid harvesting on a Sunday, but the disciples are hardly harvesting the whole field. Eating on the sabbath is allowed.

When the Pharisees query this behaviour, Jesus gives a rather strange answer. He reminds them of an occasion recounted in 1 Samuel 21 when

David and his men ate the consecrated bread that only the priests were usually allowed to eat. David was on the run at the time, because Saul was seeking to kill him. He and his men were hungry, so he went to the priest and asked for some food. The priest said he only had the holy bread set aside for the priests, but he gave that to David and allowed him and his men to eat it. The priest clearly thought feeding hungry men was more important than keeping strictly to the rules. Jesus wants to make the same point: the disciples are hungry. Denying them readily available food for no good reason makes no sense. The sabbath rules are there for human well-being and, in this instance, well-being requires the eating of food.

Why did God include the sabbath rule in the ten commandments in the first place? Well, surely it was about protecting people. The sabbath was a day when no employer could require people to work. It guaranteed everyone a day off and the opportunity to rest. But it also allowed people time to worship God. One day in every seven was to be set apart for worship to remind people of the importance of their relationship with God and to make sure it was given proper place in people's busy lives. So many people now say they don't have time to pray or to go to church. Christians who are required to work on Sundays may find it very difficult to get to church. Many families find it just isn't possible to go to church on Sundays because of swimming, football, parkrun or whatever else it may be. The sabbath is no longer set apart either for worship or for people's well-being.

We often behave – in the church as well as in wider society – as if busyness is a sign of holiness. Having a full diary shows we must be very important, especially if it is full of worthy, churchy things. Clergy are the worst at this. Most clergy find it very difficult to say no to things and church people are generally very surprised when we do. If we are constantly trying to cram more and more things into our lives, the things that get squeezed out tend to be rest, time to spend with family or friends and prayer. There is nothing holy about being too busy to pray.

Jesus went to the synagogue to worship God along with others, Once again, our group of Pharisaic spies were watching him, this time to see whether he would heal a man who was there who had a withered hand. Jesus knew what was in their minds and so he asked them whether it was lawful to do good on the sabbath or to do harm, to do what brings life or what destroys it. They chose not to answer, because they knew what the right answer was, but when Jesus healed the man, they went out and conspired against him. For

them, it was preferable for the disciples to go hungry and for this man's hand to remain useless than for their interpretation of the sabbath law to be questioned. The disciples broke no rule by plucking grain. The only rule Jesus could have been said to have broken by healing the man's hand was that of working on the sabbath if you choose to define healing as his work. The Pharisees are being petty here. This is an excuse to find fault with Jesus. If they cared so much about the sabbath, one might ask why they were following Jesus around rather than focusing on worshipping God themselves.

So does it matter that no one much keeps the sabbath any more? Well, possibly not, providing we have not lost sight of what the sabbath is for. If people are able to take time to rest and enjoy leisure, if everyone is free to worship at a time of their choosing, then it may not matter too much whether everyone is keeping Sunday special. But when some people are working on Sundays against their will, when some families have no time together because one parent works nights and the other days, when some people are working two jobs and still can't afford the rent, when even people who go to church are always in a hurry to rush on to the next thing and don't have time to get to know one another, then maybe we have got our priorities out of kilter.

Jesus reminds us that the sabbath is made for us and that he is Lord of the sabbath. We all need to create sabbath space in our lives. It doesn't have to be Sunday, but there does need to be regular time set aside to take a step back from the busyness of life and meet with God either together with others in worship or by ourselves in prayer. Daily prayer, weekly worship, the occasional quiet day or retreat are all part of how we grow as Christians and deepen our relationship with God. Rest, food and time spent with the people we love are also an important part of keeping our lives in balance. There is nothing godly about burnout.

Jesus said that he had come that we might have life in all its fullness. A full life includes sabbath time. We are responsible for making space in our lives and using our time wisely. We are not responsible for sneaking around cornfields checking up on how others are using their time. It is up to us to use our time to do good, to bring life, to allow Jesus to be Lord of our time as much as other aspects of our lives.