

## Sermon for Sunday 2 June 2024 – The First Sunday after Trinity (am)

Pete Postle, Reader

***Deuteronomy 5.12-15; Psalm 81.1-10; 2 Corinthians 4.5-12; Mark 2.23–3.6***

May all I thy say and think be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Let's start with the reading from Deuteronomy. It should be really very familiar to you, because it is the sixth of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God, both by his word and written by God on two stone tablets. So, 'Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. You shall do no work. Your male and female slave may rest as well as you.' The emphasis then is rest from one's labours. Thus the Jewish *Shabbat* is a weekly day of rest observed from sundown on Friday until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday. In Eastern Christianity, the Sabbath is considered still to be on the seventh day. But in Catholicism and most branches of Protestantism, the Lord's Day is commemorated on Sunday. That should remind us that Jesus was crucified on a Friday before that past over Sabbath and was raised on Easter Day, that momentous first Sunday.

There are 39 categories of activity which Jewish law identifies as prohibited by biblical law on the Sabbath. Many of those 39 categories have subcategories. But there are significant exceptions that permit caring for your farm stock and for the care of the needy. Coincidentally, if you look towards the back of your Book of Common Prayer; I got one of my confirmation in All Saints Sudbury, 67 years ago; you will find we in the Anglican Church have our 39 articles of religion. Same number, but for a significantly different purpose. I haven't had time to research the possible interrelation of Jewish and Anglican thinking here, but it means that if we Anglicans are wishing to retain some connections with our fellow Abrahamic religion, then I am comforted. Early Christians, mostly Jews then, continue to observe the Saturday Sabbath with prayer and rest, often worshipping on the following day, Sunday, as well. It was at the beginning of the second century AD that the Church Father Ignatius of Antioch approved non-observance of the Sabbath.

But let me return now to that emphasis on rest. My mother was a nursery nurse, then a governess. She was expected to take her charges to church twice each Sunday, and keep them really quiet in between. She and they were obliged to conform to what were Victorian standards of Sunday behaviour. Mum married the local stationmaster and Churchwarden at Catfield in Norfolk, so elements of that principle were gently passed on to me and my brothers and sisters, which is just one example of how the development of behaviour on Sundays in Christianity mirrored that of behaviour on the Sabbath in the Judea of Christ's time on Earth. A day of rest then, but now with a host of rules as to how that rest should be practised. And the diligent, perhaps overdiligent, temple and synagogue staff to enforce those rules.

Which is where I'm going to turn our attention to today's gospel reading. It's not placed at any particular period in Jesus's ministry, except that we can note that his healing miracles are now an expected part of that ministry. The disciples have done what is unlawful by one of those 39 Sabbath rules, possibly that of

winnowing, separating the grain from the chaff. Perhaps the Pharisees quoted that reading from Deuteronomy. Jesus responds by reminding the Pharisees of the occasion when David did something similar, but of greater import. You've got it in your gospel reading there. Because David did it in the house of God. And then declares that the Sabbath was made for humankind, for the purpose of rest from one's work, not for humankind to devise rules to enforce it.

We then move on to another example of the purpose of a seventh day of rest; Jesus heals the withered hand of a man, in a synagogue, on a Sabbath, which rather begs a question; could the healing have not been done on another day of the week? Jesus would be deliberately choosing to make his, or God's, point. That rules on work activities on the Sabbath should always be tempered by compassion. Humanity should never seek to impose rules that deny humanity. Which brings me back to the position in today's, Western, world with some examples. When I was in Devon, a local large church had a Sunday School for its children. A very successful Sunday school. But it was celebrated on Saturdays because most of the young congregation were involved in a junior football league on Sunday mornings. Our congregation numbers here suffer when the monthly Farmer's Market is on. When we were younger, shops and supermarkets, if they had even been invented, were not allowed to open on a Sunday. But my dad, stationmaster at Sudbury, was on duty to manage the large and happy crowds waiting on the platform for their excursion train to Clacton and Walton, every Sunday in school holiday time.

So where does that leave us here in Church? We actually endeavour to increase attendance at our Sunday services, aware of all these other attractions. So should we pursue a Sabbath-type attitude? Remind our friends, neighbours, and relatives of the purpose of a seventh day of rest? Or love them, and bless them, and hope that one day they too will find the rest of mind and soul that comes with a quiet hour in church. Joining us on the Sunday or in the hush and peace of an empty church at whatever time they can find in their busy week. Amen.