

And it was so. <sup>31</sup>God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

<sup>1</sup>Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. <sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup>So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. *Gen 1:30ff*

We read as our Old Testament Lesson today that opening chapter of the Book Genesis, giving the first of the two accounts of creation that we find in that book. This is a passage to be read out loud rather than one to be studied in minute detail as with broad brush strokes the writer presents us with a picture of the creative power of the God we worship. It is an account of breath-taking activity. For six days, as day succeeds day, new aspects of the glory of creation are revealed – light and darkness, day and night, water and land, vegetation, birds of the air, fish of the sea, all the creatures that inhabit the earth. And then man, male and female, made in the image of God, appears on the scene.

Then comes the seventh day

<sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

*Gen 2.2.*

On the seventh day, God finished his work – and he rested. The rest was the crowning act of creation. The God who creates and the God who rests are one and the same. There is something very profound about that. The seventh day, the day of rest, is the only day in the cycle of creation that we are told that God blessed and hallowed.

This of course is the root of the Jewish Sabbath. Now I don't know what images the words Sabbath, Sunday Observance strike up in your mind – but a negativity can all too easily creep in, of things that are closed, in which we concentrate on what we don't do rather than what we actually do. When I went up to Ballymena in 1989 they still used to chain up the swings in the children's playground. If something seemed to go on and on, it seemed to be 'as long as a Sunday in Belfast'. There was a dullness, a negativity.

I've always like the definition of Sunday in the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Church – 'A day of rest and gladness'. This is much closer in my mind to the Jewish concept of Sabbath as expressed in the Commandment given on Sinai:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. *Exodus 20:8-11*

It is a day when those who make things, put down their tools, those who sell shut up shop, slave and free together rest. A day of freedom for slave, for servant, for domestic animals – one day in seven no one is a slave. It is a day for worship, a day for family, for community.

In our day of seven day shopping, seven day working, seven day sport we have lost sight of that special space that is the Jewish Sabbath.

Jonathan Sacks (you know by now I am something of a fan of his), former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, offers some lovely insights in his ongoing online publication, where he speaks of Sabbath, holy time, in terms of relationship:

an encounter between God and humanity in the arena of time. Whether it is God's call to us or ours to Him, whether God initiates the meeting or we do, holy time becomes a lovers' rendezvous, a still point in the turning world when lover and beloved, Creator and creation, "make time" for one another and know one another in the special form of knowledge we call love.

And a little later in the same piece he goes on

Judah Halevi, the eleventh-century poet and philosopher, said that on Shabbat, it is as if God had personally invited us to be dinner guests at His table.[2] The Shabbat of revelation does not look back to the birth of the universe or forwards to the future redemption. It celebrates the present moment as our private time with God. It represents "the power of now."

<http://rabbisacks.org/three-versions-of-shabbat-emor-5779/>

The power of 'now' – in the presence of God, a meeting of lover and beloved.

Maybe in the activity, the schedules, the busyness of modern life, in which every moment is to be used, to be scheduled, we've lost sight of this – the power of now, of encounter with God, as with lover and beloved. We are in danger of losing the ability to do nothing, the ability to wait.

In the process, some of the teaching of the rest of scriptures loses something of its power. 'Be still and know that I am God'. Be still – it goes against the grain. But unless we learn afresh to be still, to listen, to regain that sense of the power of now, we fail to see, we fail to hear what God is doing in our midst.

It is in this spirit of the power of the now, I want to go on and briefly reflect on our Gospel reading. Set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, it is addressed primarily to disciples at the very beginning of their journey with Jesus, having left behind the certainties of family of home, of employment. The passage addresses very real fears that people looking for a roof over their head, for a mortgage, rearing young children, planning for retirement face into.

Any of us who have worried about these things know how they can take hold of us. The Jesus I see in this passage is a Jesus who is saying, ‘Stop, take a step back.’ I hear an invitation to rest, to bring our problems in the now, our hopes, our fears, our anxieties into the presence of the God who is there in our midst.

I go back to Jonathan Sacks’ words on the Sabbath:

an encounter between God and humanity in the arena of time. Whether it is God’s call to us or ours to Him, whether God initiates the meeting or we do, holy time becomes a lovers’ rendezvous, a still point in the turning world when lover and beloved, Creator and creation, “make time” for one another and know one another in the special form of knowledge we call love.

Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy.