

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 3rd June 2018

Deuteronomy 5: 12 - 15; Mark 2; 23 - 3:6

One Friday evening I was walking along the street in the Old City of Jerusalem that divides the Christian Quarter and the Jewish Quarter. An orthodox Jewish man approached me and asked if I was a Christian. I said yes, and he said, 'Good, can you help me?' I said, 'Of course, what would you like me to do?' He said, 'I can't tell you.' I looked quizzical. He said, 'It is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, and on the Sabbath we can do no work. Not even switch off the lights in our houses. If we forget to switch them off before the Sabbath begins then they have to stay on all weekend. Would you like to come to my house?'

Tentatively, I followed him home. There I found his wife and children, many lit candles, and most of the electric lights in the house blazing. 'Would you like me to switch off the lights?' I asked. 'I can't ask you to do that. You do whatever you think is right,' he said. So, tentatively I walked round the house switching off lights in silence. When he had finished the man showed me to the door and said, 'You understand, that I can't thank you.' I nodded and left.

There are places in the Jewish and Christian world where the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, is still kept as a day of rest. No work is allowed, and no use of anything that has meant others are working. In some places that observance is kept rigorously, in others not so much. Not only in Jerusalem do some people do this. In Scotland, too, there are places where Sabbath observance is a big part of life, society and culture.

However, for most Scots and Israelis, and in most societies of the Western world in the 21st century, the Sabbath as a day of rest in any form has ceased to be noticeable. For most people in our country Sunday is more like any other day of the week, than a spiritually special day of the week. For all intents and purposes a communal day of rest has been lost to us. There is no longer a day of the week when as a community we rest, a day when rather than work we spend time communing with one another, and communing with our spiritual understanding of who we are, of who is God.

The modern world of work, commerce, individual choice, 24-hour news and entertainment, and the heavy burden of domestic responsibilities have encroached almost completely on what was a traditional understanding of keeping one day of the week guarded as a communal day of rest. That has been clear to everyone for many decades, but what we are only now becoming aware of is just how far the encroachment of modern life has gone in to our Sabbath. It is not just that modern life has washed away our *day* of rest, the truth is it is in the process of washing away even our *nights* of rest.

Last weekend the Financial Times dedicated its entire magazine supplement to the subject of sleep; not to celebrating how much we enjoy sleeping, but to lamenting the lack of sleep in our lives and the devastating impact - devastating is not too

strong a word - the devastating impact that a lack of sleep has on a human being's health and well-being¹.

In an introductory article Simon Kuper wrote in the FT, which of course is a business newspaper,

I increasingly suspect that the key to success isn't talent, luck, nepotism or even showing up. It's getting enough sleep.

This observation about the chronic lack of sleep that afflicts many people and the detrimental affect it has on our lives is born out by a number of books published in the past few years about the affects of sleep deprivation,² and the growing emphasis that some medical professionals and managerial coaches put on sleep as fundamentally the most important thing affecting what we do in life, how we do it, and how we feel about our lives.

The reasons for this sleep deprivation are often very modern. Human beings evolved to sleep in a cave - dark, quiet, cool and comfortable. There was a regular rhythm to our lives. Today our cities, homes and lives are full of ambient light, noise, central heating, lumpy mattresses, and shift-working. As modern life develops so does its encroachment upon our sleep: don't look at your computer screen, phone, iPad or television at least one hour before you go to bed; don't exercise in that time either; and as for coffee and alcohol...

Rest, whether it is a day of such or even just a night, is becoming something that feels more elusive as the outside world encroaches more and more in to our lives, homes, and bedrooms lives.

An awareness of this damaging affect on our lives of the outside world encroaching into our rest is not something new. It was the point Jesus was trying to make to the Pharisees in our reading this morning. You might think that the Pharisees were doing a good job of guarding a time rest as they patrolled the Sabbath ensuring that no one did anything that might be considered encroachment.

But, as we read in the Gospel reading this morning Jesus didn't see it that way. He saw in the Pharisees strict observance of the Sabbath and the legal requirements that ensured it was observed, not a time for communal rest, but a stifling religious encroachment in to the day of rest.

Rest is not restful if you are sick or hungry or worrying. Rest is not restful if you are compelled to worship. Rest is not restful if you aren't happy, can't relax, can't enjoy yourself, and can't travel. More than anything rest is not restful if you are bored.

Throughout Jesus' life, indeed at the heart of his Gospel is good news about freedom: freedom from the oppressive secular power that encroached on and controlled people's lives back then in the days of Rome; freedom from the

¹ <https://www.ft.com/sleep>

² See for example 'Why we sleep' by Matthew Walker

oppressive religious power that encroached on and controlled people's lives back then in strict pharisaic religious legal observance; freedom even and ultimately, as Jesus demonstrated on the cross, from the oppression of the fear of death that encroaches on and controls people's lives.

The Gospel is good news of salvation, setting us free from the powers of the world that detrimentally impinge upon, oppress, control, rule our lives so that we can live life in all its fullness. That is what Jesus meant when he said, 'The Sabbath was made for the sake of man and not man for the Sabbath: therefore the Son of Man is sovereign even over the Sabbath.'³ A day or a night or an hour of rest is for us, not an opportunity for others to fill it up; It is we who are sovereign over our Sabbath, and we need to guard our rest, ourselves, from the power of encroachment and the demands of others who would use for their ends.

Just as in the days of the Pharisees when religious observance on the Sabbath was part of the point of the Sabbath, but controlling, stifling religious observance destroyed the Sabbath, so today work, entertainment, social media, coffee and alcohol, exercise, for example, are all good, enjoyable and necessary - part of the point of life - but not when they have so much power over our lives that we can no longer even get a goodnight sleep.

A friend of mine from university, Dr David Shepherd, now an assistant professor in the Hebrew Bible at Trinity College in Dublin, wrote a book called *Seeking Sabbath*. It is an account of his six months search to reclaim a Sabbath in his and his family's lives. Dr Shepherd and his wife Hilda have four young children; his task was not an easy one. Nevertheless, despite many frustrations he had some success. He wrote at the end of his book,

Although it is increasingly obvious that the world around us will refuse to stop for a minute, let alone a day, the greatest danger against which we must safeguard the Sabbath is not from the outside, but from within. The gate to the Sabbath, the gate that we must guard, is not to be found at the local supermarket; it is to be found deep within ourselves. It is there that we feel the pressure to do and do and do some more, and it is there that the pressures of this world beat upon our door. It is there that the decision is taken to fling open the gates to the business and the busyness that fills our lives.⁴

As we join together this morning to celebrate communion, let us pray that together as a community - communing together and communing with God, drawn together as we do so to be a branch his church, Jesus Christ's body on earth - that we will discover in this act of memorial to the Christ who died to set us free from all that seeks to have sovereignty over our lives, that together as a body we will find spiritual rest in this act of worship that we have guarded and marked out for ourselves as our Sabbath.

³ Mark 2:27

⁴ Shepherd D. 'Seeking Sabbath' The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008, page 100