

## **16<sup>th</sup> March 2025 – LENT: The Rest is Worship (2) – ‘Sabbath – God’s great idea’ (Gen 1:26-2:3, Mk 2:23-27)**

About 20 years ago, when we were living in London, one of our friends took a secondment in Sweden. Coming from the high-pressure London office environment, he decided to make a good impression and prove his worth by regularly working late in the office, long after his colleagues had left. About two weeks into his new job, his boss called him in for a chat. ‘I see you’ve been working late every night,’ he said to our friend, who by this time was feeling quite pleased with himself. Recognition from the boss so quickly! ‘Tell me, is anything wrong?’ / Our friend sat and stared at him, and eventually stuttered out an answer, like: ‘No, everything’s OK.’ His boss went on: ‘Here in Sweden we like to finish work at a normal time and enjoy our evening. If someone always stays late in the office, we don’t see that as a good thing, we assume it’s because they can’t do the job or there’s some other problem.’ My friend got the message, and from then on he left the office with his colleagues, guilt-free.

I wonder what your experience of working life is or was? Did you feel pressured to work long hours? Was there a culture which rewarded always being on the job? Most studies have shown that advances in technology have dramatically increased the pressure of modern working life. Although superficially communication is quicker and easier, with smartphones, texts, emails, video calls, etc, in reality it just means we’re contactable *the whole time*, and therefore, for many people, feeling like we’re at work the whole time.

Now, **there’s nothing wrong with work. Work is actually God’s idea. God loves his work** – go back to the creation story, and you’ll notice that every day God looks at what he created and said: hmm, that’s good! And we’re made in the image of God, so we’re made to work too. Purposeful activity gives us meaning, satisfaction; when done well it builds relationships, develops our character and even sometimes brings us joy. There’s nothing wrong with work.

**What’s wrong is overwork.** Work as an idol – a big hungry mouth which consumes you and your time, relentlessly. Work which becomes your identity and security, rather than God. **Work without rest.**

I understand this. I am a workaholic. A recovering one, but a workaholic nonetheless. I’ve known this for about 25 years, ever since I attended a big Christian conference shortly before I got married in 1999 and went forward for healing prayer. I’ve fought my workaholic tendencies ever since, with varying degrees of success – but like any addiction, if I think I’ve got it made, I’ll lapse into bad habits. I have to fight it every day, every week. I can also spot other workaholics a mile off – and today, I’m preaching to you. I know who you are! And I understand why you do it. I hope you do, too.

Today, our wonderful Lent series on rest continues with the theme of Sabbath, and the very helpful sub-heading: God’s great idea. Because it is God’s great idea. Our first reading was the famous passage in Genesis, but our focus today is the end of it: not so much the six days of creation but the day of rest at the end. I really like how our Lent book describes this in day 3:

“In Genesis we read that God made a beautiful abundant world. When he’s finished making it, he began a day of rest, although not because he was exhausted – God doesn’t get tired (Is 40:28). It’s fair to surmise that he began that rest, not for recovery, but because he wanted to take pleasure in his creation. Notice, too, that this day doesn’t end with “and there was evening and there was morning,” leading commentators to conclude that this day is an *eternal* day. God invites the people whom he made and loves, to join him in that eternal rest; to enjoy the world in God’s company. To just be with him. Forever... As St. Augustine expressed it in his Confessions: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. It’s all about security and identity – where do we really find that? Listen to this invitation... “You remember that home I’ve been working on? Guess what, it’s all finished... And if I may say so myself, it looks amazing!... So I was wondering if you’d like to come and spend some time with me there? We can rest, have fun, be creative, enjoy the house, the garden, the lake, eat some great food... Doesn’t that sound good? Let me know, much love. God.”

I imagine most of us felt very drawn to that – it sounds good, doesn't it? ...But then for many of us, as we listened, another voice also popped into our head – that's not what life is really like. It sounds great, but maybe too good to be true. Surely God wants us to be *useful* while we're on this earth?

So, as we reflect on this theme today, and wrestle with our own pressures and insecurities, three reflections from our bible passages. **First, you are not your work** – God gave us the Sabbath to bless us, to invite us to rest and to be – to be with him, and also with others, and, dare I say it, to be present to ourselves too. To reconnect. But Jesus reminds us that **the Sabbath is made for us, not the other way round. It's not a set of rules, it's an invitation. Be still and know that God is God.**

And as we do that, we also come to realise that we are not God, God is. Overwork whispers that great lie into our ears: it's all about us. About how hard we work, how we make things happen. We can even spiritualise it: God expects us to make things happen, and he's disappointed if we don't. We're workaholics for Jesus! The problem is, when we look at Jesus it doesn't sound much like him: 'come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you relentless work to make sure you're useful to me.' When the Prodigal Son returns, the father doesn't say: great you're back, now let's put you to work – there's a field of sheep need shearing, and your brother needs a hand threshing the corn. No, he throws a party.

And yes, work matters, most of us have to work hard in our jobs. But it doesn't define us. Making sure we honour the Sabbath restores our trust and humility, and keeps our identity secure in God.

**Second, be intentional about rest – God deliberately stopped making.** He didn't have to – he could always have created more, he's God; but once what he'd done was very good, that was good enough. And then he rested, and just enjoyed what he'd done. And then he gave us the Sabbath day every 7<sup>th</sup> day to make sure we were intentional about rest, too. Plan your rest. Don't just put everything else in the diary and then rest is just what's left over. Give yourself a balanced diet of time with God, time with others, and time for yourself – especially if you're an introvert. Many jobs nowadays have set hours, but this kind of planning is particularly important if you're self-employed or work contracts. And remember that work is all useful activity, not just paid activity. The golden rule is: if it feels like work, it is work. So, if your time off is all jobs, then really it's a working day, you just don't get paid!

Finally, and this reflection has been incredibly important to me in my own journey away from workaholism: **learn to distinguish between being driven to do something and being called to do something. Workaholics are driven, not called.** We need to work to drown out the bad voices: the ones that tell us we're nothing if we don't work, we have to achieve to be loved or to get attention, we're letting our parents down, we need to be someone, to show ambition, life is a competition and we have to beat others. And it's really hard to confront these voices, because they're often put there by others when we're young – usually our parents, but maybe our peers, maybe a teacher or even a minister – and it drives us. Even if we become a Christian, we get this voice confused with the voice of God: we think it's what God thinks, too.

Psychologists will tell you that you are what the most important person in your life thinks you are. And that voice usually comes from an important person. To wean ourselves off it, we need to hear the voice of God. **We are what God thinks we are: loved, precious, worth his attention even when we achieve nothing at all,** delighted at every little thing we get right, endlessly patient with all the little things we get wrong. The Lord doesn't drive us, he *calls* us. And everyone has a secret driver, there are 4: being important, being right, being liked and being needed.

Our journey towards wholeness begins when we operate from a place of calling, from a place of security in the gentle, joyful love of our Heavenly Father. And all those other voices and secret drivers get put in their place. They'll always be there – but they have no power over us anymore. Rest really is God's great idea. He invites us to rest. He calls us to rest. And he forgives our workaholism, our drivenness. Lay it all down before him. This Lent, let him give you rest. Amen.