

## 9<sup>th</sup> March 2025 – LENT: The Rest is Worship (1) – ‘Rest and worship’ (Psalm 62, Matthew 11:28-30)

Let me begin by telling you about an unusual experience I had last Saturday. I got up at my usual time and made breakfast. I usually check the edit of the online service first thing on Saturday, so I went and sat in my study and began to watch. It was then that I noticed something – there was something in the sky – it was a big yellow ball. And I thought to myself: ‘What’s this?’ And this big yellow ball was moving very slowly, but it was also very bright. About ten minutes after I first noticed it, it had moved a little bit and was now shining through the trees right into my eyes. I was struggling to see the computer screen.

I had to head off for the new bishop’s service not long after, but I made a mental note that I would have to investigate this big bright yellow ball a bit more, later. In fact, when we arrived for the bishop’s service and parked the car, I also noticed something else: this big ball was warm. If I stood in a place where I could see all of it, I could feel heat on my face. Now I was really intrigued. I had a feeling that I knew what this big ball was, but it was a long time ago and I couldn’t quite place it – what I did know, though, was I really liked this big ball and I couldn’t wait to get out into the fresh air later in the day to enjoy the light and the heat of this big ball some more.

Which is exactly what I did when I got home – just for about 30 minutes until the big ball disappeared behind the next-door-neighbour’s house, and then it felt all dark and cold again. But the funny thing is, this ball has appeared day after day since – except on my day off, inevitably – and every time I go outside to spend a bit of time with this big bright yellow ball, I feel a little bit better for doing so. I can’t really explain why, it just seems to have that effect on me.

I’m telling you this story because maybe some of you have had this experience too. In fact, I’ve talked about my experience with the big bright yellow ball in the sky with a few people this week and it’s had the same effect on them, too. I think we might be on to something here...!

Today we begin our new series ‘The Rest is worship’, based on our Lent book, and although it might sound strange, my experience with the big bright yellow ball – which I learnt this week is called ‘the sun’ (who knew?) – is also where our Lent book begins. It makes the point right at the start that ‘as humans, we love putting things in boxes... Our box marked “rest” might contain: a lie-in, watching TV, reading a trashy novel, having some time off... those kinds of things. Meanwhile our box marked “worship” may hold: singing, church services, prayer, liturgy... religious or “spiritual” sounding things.’

But, the question is, are rest and worship two completely different things? Think about the sun, and that glorious first time in the year it appears with any real force. The book continues: ‘Then comes the day when the world seems lighter than the day before, and someone says in shock “it’s actually quite warm out there.” And so you hurry outside and simply turn your face into the sunshine. You don’t need to talk about it, explain to the sun what you need from it – nothing is asked of you in that moment. You simply follow the deep longing in your body and soul, and place yourself where that longing can be met. Perhaps rest, *and* worship, are God’s invitation to follow the deep longing in your body and soul, to place yourself where he can meet that need.’

This season of Lent, we’ll be thinking about rest, and how we can build life-giving rest into our lives. We’ll be looking at rest from lots of perspectives, but the course – and our series – starts with a simple observation that we usually miss. Most of us agree with the basic principle of following Jesus: that all of our lives are worship. It’s not just Sunday, it’s Monday to Saturday as well. God is interested in our work, our family life, our hobbies, our money, our politics, our climate, all of the meaningful and purposeful ways we use our lives. We rarely ever think about the fact that **God is just as interested in our rest. How we rest is worship, too.** It’s not the bit we do when we’re not worshipping God by being useful – good rest *is* worship. It’s not just ‘time off’ – it’s time dedicated to restoration of our souls and bodies. The rest is worship.

If you take nothing else away from today, or this course, take this: **how you rest matters to God**. He doesn't see it as wasted time, or weakness, or what you do when you're no longer useful. And more than that, **our capacity to rest is intimately connected with our capacity to worship**. The two overlap significantly and feed off each other. A holiday was originally a holy-day – now there's a thought... (More on that later in the course.)

But let's start with Jesus' own teaching on rest, and that famous passage from Matthew 11. What does Jesus teach us about rest? Four brief observations from these few glorious lines of scripture:

**First, rest is a gift that Jesus longs to give us.** 'Come to me,' he says, 'and I will give you rest.' If I was to ask you what good things Jesus gives you, you will probably say lots of things like: love, joy, peace, purpose, hope, grace, forgiveness, life. Not many of us naturally include this one: 'rest'. In fact, Jesus only directly gives us two gifts, in terms of words he actually speaks: peace and rest. Of course, he gives us all the other things, but we infer those from his teaching and his example. In terms of what he offers us directly, it's only two, and one of those is rest. Rest is a gift Jesus longs to give you.

**Second, rest is more than the absence of work.** This is absolutely vital, and in many ways, it's the same as what we observe with 'peace', say on Remembrance Sunday. Peace is more than the absence of war or conflict; it's a state of being. Rest is the same: Jesus doesn't see rest as simply time off or sleep (though we need both); what he offers is 'rest for our souls'. Soul rest – in other words, rest is not just relaxation, it's restoration. The clue is in the word! Good rest is life-giving, it feeds all those deep parts of ourselves that need renewing. We'll look at this in more detail in the weeks to come, but another fundamental observation to get us thinking today: is your rest restoring you? You may take time off, or go on holiday, but is it rest for your soul?

**Third, and this one may surprise you: rest is linked to particular qualities of character.** 'Learn from me,' Jesus says, 'for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' Gentleness and humility, according to Jesus, enable us to find rest. How does that work? I think what Jesus is getting at here is something we'll look at in more detail next week, but it's about getting away from achievement and competitiveness as a rule of life. When he refers to 'the yoke' that would have been understood to be the Jewish Law, and Jesus says his yoke is different – it's about the heart, it frees us from endlessly measuring our lives, from earning our salvation. And although Jesus doesn't mention competitiveness or achievement specifically, I think he understands this way of thinking is innately achievement-driven. We need to recognise that the sort of values our culture honours – assertiveness, achievement, efficiency – instinctively undermine a life of rest, as Jesus imagines it.

Finally, and here's where we'll land: **rest is something we can get better at. Jesus certainly thinks so: 'Learn from me... and you will find rest for your souls.'** This is one of the great early insights of the book. It's a mistake to think that rest is like breathing – something we do naturally, without thinking about it. No, we can practise forms of rest, and get better at it. This is partly because our lives and circumstances change. What worked for us 20 years ago, may not be possible now. But also, because all of us have unique personalities. What one of us finds restful, another doesn't. We need to discover what works best for us, what is *truly* restful – experiment, try new things, adapt old things.

This is where I'm preaching the sermon to myself. I'm 52 years old and I'm not sure I've ever learned how to rest. I'm not writing this and speaking this as the expert. I've probably learnt more in the first two days of starting this book than I have in any two-day period for years. But this book, this series, and above all these words of Jesus, give me hope. My rest, your rest matters to God. It is worship! It's a gift Jesus longs to give us and it's one we can all get better at. My hope, my prayer is that all of us find ourselves able to rest better, to be restored in this season of Lent. I'll finish with this quote which ends day 1 of the book: 'It's time to go back to the beginning: when rest was required, when rest was sacred. When quietness was not a weakness and trust was not something to fear... Return to rest... Return to the source of your strength, and in doing so, you will be saved. Rest is salvation.' Amen.