

Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

When we learned the Ten Commandments off as children, the third commandment read: 'You shall keep holy the Sabbath Day'. This brief formula is a summary of the actual commandment which occurs twice in the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the versions, the one from the Book of Deuteronomy, is the **First Reading** of today's Mass.

The third commandment has powerful symbolic value. Positively there is the command to work: we have the obligation and the privilege of continuing God's creative and redeeming work. The God of Israel, however, is a God who redeems people from slavery. The Jews realised that unrelieved commitment to work leads to slavery – either to the will of another, or to one's own need to be in control. The law required that on one day of the week people ceased from working on nature and manipulating it for their own purposes. Instead they sat back and yielded to it, lest they forget that God is the Creator, lest they get so absorbed in their own power that they fail to recognise the sacred wonder of God's creation.

The commandment requires that those in charge could not work themselves and they were not allowed to work their children, their domestic slaves or even their farm animals. The Sabbath Day, therefore, stands as a symbol of our need for God and of our equality before him. This day is to be set aside so that everyone may 'rest', may have the space to attend to God, to remember his action and to celebrate his love.

From the earliest years of Israel's presence in Canaan, agricultural labour was forbidden on the Sabbath. The observance of the Sabbath took on a special significance for the Jews on their return from exile. Their self-identity assumed a special importance now that Judah was part – and a small part – of the huge Persian empire. The people were forced to ask themselves what it was that set them apart from the peoples around them. They sought to identify what it was that made them special to God and how they were to express this special identity.

Of particular significance was the covenant which God had made with them, and among the many ways in which they responded to this covenant the institution of the Sabbath held special importance. This was the day when the people assembled for prayer in the synagogues. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant. In the Book of Exodus we read: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant'(Exodus 31:13,16).

The Sabbath was a day to delight in the Lord. In the section of the Isaiah scroll written after the return from Exile we read: 'If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord'(Isaiah 58:13-14).

In today's **Gospel**, we witness the profound difference between Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath and that of the religious leaders of his day. They would have agreed with his first

statement: 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath'. However, they could not accept his claim that 'the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath'. Jesus' defence of his disciples and his action of healing the man with the withered hand involve a claim to be free from the oppressive interpretations of the Law with which his contemporaries were burdened. In today's Second Reading Paul stresses the freedom brought by Jesus. As regards the Sabbath, it is the freedom from being enslaved by the Law itself. People are free to celebrate the creative action of God's redeeming love in their lives.

In the early Church, Jews who became disciples of Jesus continued to observe the Sabbath. They also gathered in their homes on the following day, the 'first day of the week', the Lord's Day, to celebrate the Eucharist. Christianity had its roots in Judaism, and it is understandable that the first generation of Christians would have found it difficult to undergo the painful uprooting process necessary for the Church if it was to be seen as relevant to the non-Jewish world. Stephen and his followers among the Greek-speaking converts seem to have been the first to realise the necessity of liberating the Christian community from the restrictions of the culture in which it was born. He was also the first victim of the opposition which this aroused (Acts 6-7).

A number of the Jewish Christians were determined to retain the Jewish Law as being essential to the Church, and Paul's letters witness to the constant battle he fought to allow non-Jewish converts to live as disciples of Jesus without having to conform to the Law which was so sacred to the Jews. Paul's position was accepted in principle at the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15; Galatians 2:1-10), but old habits die hard, and the opposition seems to have collapsed only with the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, shortly after which the Jewish authorities, as an act of self-preservation, excommunicated Christian Jews from the synagogue. This made irrelevant any further debate of the matter within the Christian community.

As the following words of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, indicate, by the close of the first century, the Sabbath was no longer observed by Christians: 'We have seen how former adherents of the ancient customs have since attained to a new hope; so that they have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's day instead, the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to him and his death. That death, though some deny it, is the very mystery which has moved us to become believers, and endure tribulation to prove ourselves pupils of Jesus Christ, our sole teacher'(Letter to the Magnesians n.9).

However, this does not mean that the values expressed in the Sabbath law are not relevant to our lives. This has been stressed again recently in the build up to the Jubilee Year. The Jewish Jubilee, like the stress on the Sabbath, was part of the plan for the reconstruction of Judah after the exile. The Jubilee was meant to happen every fifty years, that is to say, at the completion of seven lots of seven years. The accent on seven is for symbolic reasons and it picks up on many of the ideas associated with the seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath.

More than ever today we need to be reminded that unrelieved commitment to work leads to slavery – either to the will of another, or to one's own need to be in control. Those who worked out the Sabbath laws and the Jubilee ideal would surely have been horrified to see the way we have enslaved the workers in the name of market forces and successful capitalism. They would also have been horrified at the way in which we have allowed nature to be ravaged in our time. We have a lot to learn from the Sabbath observance. We need to work out strategies to

structure our week in such a way that there is a pause from our manipulation of nature for our own purposes. We, more than ever, need to learn again to yielded to nature, to enjoy nature and to care for the world, lest they forget that God is the Creator, lest we get so absorbed in our own power that we fail to recognise the sacred wonder of God's creation.

As Christians we have been encouraged to do this not on the Sabbath but on the day of the resurrection so as to remind ourselves and our society of the freedom brought to us by Jesus, a freedom which includes freedom from the slavery of work, for ourselves and for every person, however poor and needy. No one should have to be slave in order to survive.