

## Sabbath for today

Jo and I will be sharing the sermon today.

As many of you know I have worked as a surgeon for several decades and this has involved caring for people 24/7. In reflecting on today's message, I recalled a time during my training in the 80s when I worked for a highly respected Christian surgeon and observed that he would often drop in to see his patients on his way to church on a Sunday morning. This usually resulted in identifying problems that needed sorting out that inevitably resulted in him being late or missing church altogether. What I discovered was that his wife was waiting for him in the car all the time.

In considering this I was struck by 2 things.

1. How often our responsibilities and expectations seem to rule us, leaving us with the sense that we have no control over how we live. As a surgeon there are layers of duty to meet that can overwhelm. However, this is no different for a mother with young children, a person who is working two jobs to make ends meet or a teacher with multiple assignments to mark.
2. How much our own approach to Sabbath rest impacts on others. Jo has experienced this with me for a lifetime. But this is a social justice issue affecting not only family, those we train, our colleagues and employees.

What does scripture say?

Both Stan and Josh have reminded us that the Genesis creation narrative concludes with God resting and noting that the resulting creation was **very good**.

God himself inaugurated the principle of sabbath rest.

In Exodus, the Sabbath is written in stone as the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment. 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... the seventh day is a **sabbath** to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.' Observing the Sabbath becomes law.

Throughout the prophets we see the people challenged to enter God's rest and the consequences of refusing to do so, repeatedly.

The teachers of the law spent hundreds of years writing and enforcing the 'small print' of what not doing any work might mean and by the time Jesus was teaching they had it clearly worked out with supposedly water-tight definitions and exceptions.

The great irony is that Jesus, the Word who was with God in the beginning, is the one through whom all things were made. It was Jesus at work in the creation and Jesus who with the Father and the Spirit rested on the seventh day and who established the Sabbath. You can feel his exasperation as he explains 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' and when challenged with "is it lawful to heal on the sabbath?" responded with "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Jesus breaks the legalism of the teachers of the law. He teaches that the Sabbath is not so much about what **you cannot do** as about **what you can and should do**. The Sabbath is about resting, allowing ourselves to be restored, it's about doing good, it's about healing. It's letting go and letting God.

I found these words of Jesus very freeing when my work had me rostered to work on Sundays and often responding to those in need on a Saturday (in Nepal that was the one day off of the week) or Sunday in NZ.

What about St Paul?

In Colossians 2 and Romans 14 Paul makes it clear that a legalistic approach to keeping the Sabbath is missing the point. The Sabbath is a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality however is found in Christ. The Sabbath points to Christ as the source of rest. And for those who argue that the Sabbath is a fixed day of the week he makes it clear in Romans that we each need to be convinced of how we take our sabbath rest.

Finally we look at Hebrews chapter 4. This is a somewhat complex chapter that discusses the Sabbath and is based on Psalm 95. It encourages us to learn from the experience of the people of Israel as they passed through the wilderness. They hardened their hearts and did not believe the Lord was leading them or providing for them and this prevented them from entering the rest God had for them.

Hebrews 4 v 9-11

9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. <sup>11</sup> **Let us, therefore, strive to enter that rest,** so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

There is both a promise and a challenge in these verses but the words that have so often struck me in this passage are **strive** and **rest**. Striving and resting are opposites so what does this verse mean. I believe it is as relevant now as it was 2000 years ago. If we do not strive or make every effort we will not enter rest but just keep rushing on hemmed in by pressures and responsibilities. To enter the rest we have to be intentional. We have to deliberately make space for rest. Otherwise it just won't happen. Trust me, I know. It can be carving out time to sit or walk or read or just breathe deeply. It can be prioritising meeting with others in small groups or church or over a meal. It can be making a habit of prayer or meditation or exercise. Whatever it is you will need to make every effort make it actually happen.

(Jo continues)

Ian has shown us that how we live our lives is important and it also impacts others.

When we are too busy, we become empty, we forget that we are loved children of God and we don't have time to notice others, instead their needs become unwelcome interruptions in our busy schedules.

So, one crucial aspect of Sabbath rest is taking time to encounter Jesus, to just enjoy His presence and let Him transform and refresh us.

How can we do this?

The Bible tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus whose life and teachings give us a clear example- the way he lived, his teaching and invitation to wear his yoke and be filled with his spirit. In fact, he clearly invites the tired and worn-out to come to him and learn his grace-filled rhythms of life.

I want to talk about two of these examples which have personally impacted my life and taught me so much about rest and sabbath.

The first is the Story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10.

This story paints a vivid picture of a blind man called Bartimaeus wanting to meet Jesus. He is a beggar in the dust at people's feet in a noisy and chaotic crowd, but he's someone desperate for attention and help.

Despite the noise and bustle, Jesus stops, hears his cries for mercy and calls him to come!

Imagine how everything changes for Bartimaeus as he responds, how the noise of the crowd fades away, the rebukes are forgotten, and his focus now becomes solely on Jesus- on his voice and his words in this simple question,  
“What do you want me to do for you?”

The beggar surprisingly did not ask Jesus for money or help but asked simply to be able to see.

Can you imagine how as his eyes were opened, the first thing he saw was the eyes and face of Jesus- which I am sure would have reflected Jesus' love and delight, as he watched Bartimaeus “see” for the first time. What transformation in the life of this man. This is what happens when one encounters Jesus.

Bartimaeus now has a totally new perspective, He sees himself reflected in His Lord's eyes and can feel his joy, he can see the world around him now full of beauty and colour. This man is changed and ready to follow Christ with joy and praise.

This story has a special place in my heart- as in Nepal I often felt like I was blind, struggling to make sense of situations in a strange culture and in the demands of life around me. I too needed to have my eyes opened to see God at work. So like Bartimaeus, I had to learn some simple steps which have become a regular practice in my life, and I still need to be reminded of them!

First- like Bartimaeus, I need to recognize my need of Jesus, to stop in all the noise and business of life and call out for mercy. Then make the space to respond to his call to come and to take long enough to let the noise and busyness of life fade so I can hear again his simple question.  
“What do you want me to do for you? “

Once again to take the time to let Him open my eyes to see not only his delight, but again to be reminded that I am his beloved child but then to be transformed to see the world and those around me in a fresh way. I need to have my perspectives changed!

This always gives me new life and energy so I can follow again as a grateful disciple.

Taking Sabbath rest is one way which enables this, and I have found repeatedly that if we come and ask Jesus for eyes to see, we don't have to walk through life as blind, busy people, but we can start to recognize

beauty, the miracles, and the wondrous works of God all around us. It enables us to walk through life differently, full of joy and gratitude.

The second a teaching of Jesus in Matthew 11 came alive to me as I watched the bulls ploughing the fields in Nepal. The animals were yoked together with a handmade wooden yoke, shiny from decades of use and often a young bull would be yoked to a more experienced animal. What struck me was how the older and wiser animal would be used to guide and teach his young companion.

The young animal would often want to veer off to snatch food or go in another direction. The yoke and the steady plodding of the old bull would prevent this and keep both on track.

If the younger animal tried to race ahead, he was restrained by the yoke to slow down. If he lagged, the yoke pulled him along, enabling him to continue. Ploughing is hot and difficult work and often the animals were left for a time yoked together to rest in the shade. Being under the yoke meant rest happened, so later there was energy to finish the work.

When Jesus invites us in Matthew 11 to get under his yoke, He is like the wise bull teaching and helping us to walk in His path for us, in the right direction, to walk at his pace and to rest when needed.

This is good news for those of us who need direction and who are tired and too busy.

This is how Eugene Peterson puts it:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Matthew 11 v 28 - 30 [The Message]

Ian and I have found it vital to make sure that we walk in pace with Jesus, so we are learning to slot in regular practices that stop us getting tired and worn out. We need times to meet with God and others, and times for walking, biking or just sitting in creation. This reconnects us to the creator and reminds us that this is God’s world. He is still in charge, He rested and so should we.

All of us know that to live fruitful lives we need to abide in Jesus and be attached as a branch of his vine. Jesus also invites us to walk through

life as his beloved children living in his rhythms of grace by walking alongside him under His yoke.

However, all of us are different and we have different ways to draw near to God and to find rest. So, like the readers of the book of Hebrews you and I are left with a choice.

We can let our busy lives dictate how we spend all our time, or we can be intentional and deliberately create space for letting go of those pressures and entering his rest.

So, let's consider this question:

**What does making every effort to enter that rest of God mean for you and I in our lives in 2023?**