



21 August – 27 August 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

What does it mean to rest? The ancient Hebrew idea of Sabbath offers an answer, but it's far more than just stopping our activity for a while. It is also far more than just personal time off. For the Bible, the Sabbath is the foundation for Jesus' teaching about God's Reign. Out of the Sabbath day flowed the Sabbath year - an entire year of rest for people, animals, and the land. Then, out of this flowed the Jubilee - the celebration of the fiftieth year in which everyone and everything rested, and in which debts were cancelled, slaves were freed, and all land was returned to its original owners. The whole idea of rest in the Scriptures is tied into this system that ensured that no one was exploited or overworked, and nothing was abused or turned into a wasteland through overuse. But, for this kind of rest to happen we need to trust in God's wisdom, God's provision, and the mutual care of all of God's creation. This is the message of God's Reign that Jesus preached.

Unless we can trust that we will be sustained, we cannot rest. If we believe that our wellbeing is entirely in our own hands, we cannot rest. If we are afraid that someone else will come and take what is ours, we will never rest. In our world, where we are increasingly driven by achievement, consumption, and self-protection, it is no wonder that we are burning out. But, if we are to find rest - for ourselves and for those around us - we will need to learn to embrace God's ways of simplicity, service, and sacrifice. Only once we are all safe, provided for and respected will our society find the rest it craves. This is the prophetic message of this week's meditations.

SUNDAY 21 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 13:10-17

Reflect: You don't have to be a Bible scholar to know that the synagogue leader in today's story got it wrong. For him, Sabbath

was a law that had to be obeyed at all costs - and the law was not life giving, but had become a legalistic chain around the people's necks. For this man healing was work, and work could not be done on the Sabbath, and so Jesus had broken the law. This man's view of the Sabbath, and of the law, brought no rest. It takes work to ensure that you don't put a foot wrong when the law is complex and rigid. It also brought no life. When healing is frowned upon because of an arbitrary and rigid interpretation of the law, the result is oppression, suffering, and a cold, compassionless heart.

For Jesus, though the Sabbath was a very different thing. It was the most appropriate time to heal and liberate people because that's what really brings rest-oration. The idea of Sabbath, for Jesus, was not about ceasing activity for no reason other than "God told us to". It was about choosing to do what would set people free to enjoy abundant life and to find the true rest of the soul - the rest of knowing that we are cared for, sustained and healed by God's grace and love.

How can you embrace Jesus' Sabbath practice in your own life today?

Do: There was a time when play was considered a breach of the Sabbath. Fortunately, that is no longer a popular view of this important practice. In fact, play is perhaps one of the best ways to experience the rest-oration of Sabbath - especially if our playfulness sets others free to play as well. Today, spend some time in restorative play, and allow it to teach you how to bring restoration to others.

Pray: As I play in your presence, O God, may you restore me, and through me, restore others.

MONDAY 22 AUGUST 2022

Read: Hebrews 3:7-4:11

Reflect: The writer to the Hebrews calls us to put our trust in Jesus because Jesus is greater than Moses. But, as in the time of Moses when the people struggled to trust in God's care and love, so the writer recognises that it may be tough for followers of Jesus to trust. And so, the writer calls us to hear the call of God's Spirit, to

recognise Jesus' divinity, and to build our lives around God's grace and love revealed in Jesus. If we are unable to trust, we will never be able to find rest. Our unbelief and fear will constantly drive us to question, to second-guess God, and to try to create additional security for ourselves in case God doesn't come through. This is why the writer links rest with faith.

But the Good News in today's reading is that God has given us a constant second chance in Jesus. No human being, and no geographical place - not Joshua and not the Promised Land - could really give God's people rest. But, in Jesus' mission of God's Reign, true rest can be found, because it leads us into a whole new way of being in which we, together, are recipients and channels of God's provision and care. This is why we need to learn to trust the way of Jesus - the way of giving, of simple living, and of being willing to sacrifice for one another. This doesn't mean we will have every desire of our hearts, or that we will never suffer. But it does mean that we will have all we need, and that we will always have a support network to sustain and strengthen us when things get hard.

How can you place your trust in God's Reign a little more today and move closer to God's rest in your own life?

Do: All the things the Bible says about provision and faith are connected with a community that provides care and support for one another in every way. Today, move deeper into God's rest - and help others to do the same - by reaching out to your companions in the faith in some way. Maybe send an email to your small group, or phone a friend who is going through a difficult time. Allow this sense of connection to bring peace and rest to your soul.

Pray: Connect me more deeply with my companions in faith, O God, so that I may support them even as they support me.

TUESDAY 23 AUGUST 2022

Read: Revelation 3:7-13

Reflect: The world we live in does not always make it easy for us to find peace and rest. Sometimes, because of our commitment to the Reign of God, people around us may even go out of their way to make life more difficult for us. This seems to have been the

experience of the Christians in Philadelphia. Although they were a weak and persecuted church, they had remained faithful to Jesus in spite of the attacks of those who claimed to be doing God's will (those of the "synagogue of Satan" mentioned in verse 9). They had persevered in their faith, and so Jesus spoke a word of comfort and reassurance, encouraging them to hold on to their faith, and to find their refuge in God's name. Even in the midst of this very difficult time, God offered God's people a place of rest.

When the Bible calls us to embrace the Sabbath rest of God, this is not a promise that we will never experience anything bad or painful. God's rest is not the absence of conflict or suffering, but the ability to find security and strength in God's presence no matter what our circumstances might be. The power in this gift is that it frees us from the need to retaliate or to make our suffering worse through blaming, complaining, or losing faith. Rather, as we find our rest in God's presence, we endure, and we bring peace and rest to others.

How can you find a refuge in God today?

Do: When we pray for ourselves and for others - including our enemies - we begin to get a sense of God's presence and we find that we are more easily able to rest in God's purposes. Today, allow your prayer life to lead you into a place of rest in Christ.

Pray: In a world where there is little rest, Jesus, help me to find and share the rest you give to me.

WEDNESDAY 24 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 6:6-11

Reflect: It never ceases to amaze me how easy it is to get so caught up in proving ourselves right that we miss out on the blessings that God wants to give us. There are so many stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing people on the Sabbath, and pretty much every time some legalistic religious person opposes him. In the case of today's healing, the religious leaders are so keen to catch Jesus out, that they watch him closely while he is teaching. It seems that they are so absorbed in whether he would heal the man with the deformed hand or not that they aren't even listening to what he has to say. Then, as Jesus, once again explains the true nature

of the Sabbath, they are still unmoved. All that happens is that Jesus' words make them angrier and more determined than ever to destroy him.

What is interesting about this healing that there is no indication that Jesus even touched the man. He simply instructed him to stretch out his hand, and when he did it was healed. I wonder if Jesus did this way in order to show the religious leaders that the healing was not done "by him" but by God. If God was willing to heal on the Sabbath, then the religious leaders were not arguing against Jesus, but against the God they claimed to serve! When we refuse to open ourselves to the life-giving work of God, simply because it comes in unfamiliar forms, we will never be at rest. We will always end up substituting our own legalistic ideas for the liberating freedom of God's Spirit.

How might God be seeking to share life with you in a new way? How can you open yourself more fully to it?

Do: When we live with an attitude of invocation - constantly inviting God's Spirit to fill our lives with God's presence and power - we are more easily able to stay open to whatever new thing God may be seeking to do. Today, take every opportunity to invoke God's Spirit - especially when you are being challenged or surprised.

Pray: Holy Spirit, open my heart to the life you bring, even when it comes in surprising packaging.

THURSDAY 25 AUGUST 2022

Read: 1 Peter 3:8-12

Reflect: Once we have learned to find our rest in God, the confidence and security we find always manifests in a new humility. This will be the focus of Sunday's readings. It is significant, though, that humility and restfulness always seem to go together. When we are driven constantly to reach for more, to be more, and to prove ourselves, it is hard to find any rest at all, and our interactions with others have little room for true humility. That's why the words of Peter are so important for us today. His instructions are just common sense and very down to earth, but they are liberating and life-giving.

The focus of Peter's words is on relationships. If we are to find rest in the way that the Sabbath teaches, it requires us to be in interdependent relationships with others. And it requires a deep humility for relationships to remain strong and healthy. That's why we need to sympathise with one another and refuse to retaliate when we feel that we have been hurt. Rather, when we repay any harm we experience with blessing, healing can happen. When we watch how we speak - taking care to speak what is true and what is kind, and when we strive to maintain peace, we not only find that our lives are more restful, but we bring that restfulness into our community. It may be disappointing to realise that spirituality is so mundane and ordinary, but this is where the real work of our faith happens. And then, as we learn to live in the gentle, humble rest of God, we contribute to bringing peace to the world - which is really rather dramatic when you think about it!

How can you work to live more humbly today?

Do: Humility and rest are not about making ourselves smaller than we are, or about having no desires, hopes and dreams. Rather, they are about recognising what goodness we already enjoy, and then using our desires to bring life and joy to others as well as to ourselves. In order to do this, we need to develop a habit of thanksgiving - both for what we have and for what God will use us to bring to others. Today give thanks and allow it to free you to dream big and dream selflessly.

Pray: Thank you, O God, for all that you have given me, and for all that will do to bring goodness through me to others.

FRIDAY 26 AUGUST 2022

Read: Proverbs 18:6-12

Reflect: The choices we are called to make, as followers of Jesus, are often very small and, seemingly, insignificant. It may feel strange to think that God's Reign is built through little things like the words we speak and our attitude to work, but all of these little things add up to a very big difference in the world. That's why the Book of Proverbs can be such a helpful guide - its practical wisdom helps us to manifest God's Reign in the details of our lives.

Today's short section basically offers two alternative ways to live. We can be haughty and lazy and use our words to spread rumours and discord, and to boast about our wealth. Or we can be humble and gentle, using our words to speak God's name and to nurture trust in God's care and protection. The first option makes us destructive and inevitably leads us into lives of brokenness and humiliation. The second may not seem as glamorous on the surface, but it leads us into lives of peace and joy, of rest and of deep connection.

The truth is, we all live in both ways. In our worst moments we fall into the traps of pride, gossip and laziness. But, when our best selves come to the fore, we enjoy the blessings of humility, peace and strong relationships - and we bring joy to those around us. How are you going to choose to live today?

Do: This side of eternity we will always wrestle with our worst selves. This is not a problem unless we try to pretend that we are perfect and refuse to acknowledge the broken parts of ourselves. But, if, when we act in destructive ways, we are quick to confess it and repent (change), we are not controlled by our brokenness, but our best selves are set free to guide our lives consistently. Today, whenever you discover your worst self taking over, confess it and repent, as quickly as you can.

Pray: Forgive me and change me, O God, when my worst self tries to take over my life.

SATURDAY 27 AUGUST 2022

Read: Matthew 20:20-28

Reflect: One of the moments in the Gospels that most clearly reveals the difference between human empires and God's Reign is the story of James and John's request to sit at Jesus' left- and right-hand side. In Matthew's version of the story, it is their mother who approaches Jesus. We don't know if they had asked her to do it as a way to appear more humble even as they asked to be exalted, or if she, as a proud mother, had come up with the idea. Either way, the whole family had misunderstood what Jesus had been teaching. They still had the idea that the kingdom Jesus was speaking about was a place that would offer them power and prestige, and they

were determined to secure their position. But Jesus' answer to their request shows how very different God's values are. The first question Jesus asked was not whether they had the right skills or aptitude, but whether they were willing to suffer. When they answered - probably not really understanding the question - that they were, Jesus assured them that they would suffer, but that the places they were seeking had already been allocated. Then he taught them a fundamental principle of God's Reign - the greatest are those who serve as the lowest slaves.

In the Gospels the moment when Jesus came into his kingdom is when he is lifted on the cross. So, the places at his right and his left were the crosses on either side of him - and those who were given those places were criminals. What could be a better image of how different God's Reign is from human empires?

How can you claim your place as a servant in God's Reign today?

Do: The call of today's story is clear. God's Reign calls us to serve and to look to the needs of others more than our own. Today, try to use every opportunity to put this principle into practice by serving those around you - even the ones you believe should be serving you.

Pray: As you have given yourself to serve and save me, Jesus, make me a servant of all.