

Pentecost 23
28/10/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:8-11
Psalm 62
Hebrews 4:4-11
Mark 2:23-28

The Fourth Commandment

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery, (therefore)...”
“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”

Arriving at this fourth commandment, we are faced for the first time by a change of form in the words used. No longer do we hear: “*You shall **not**...*” as we did with the first three commandments, and as we hear again for every other except this and the fifth commandment to come: “Honour father and mother”. For the first time we hear a positive and not a negative note: “*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*”. This recurring Sabbath day was originally a day dedicated both to memory and hope – a day remembering both exodus, and a day open for new possibilities in the life of Israel with Yahweh.

This simple recognition makes irrelevant so much of the sad history of “Sabbath observance”, as we have known it. The whole history of Sunday observance in the West is a fascinating if, invariably, a depressing story. Were we still able to question many previous generations, most might trace their lack of sympathy for the church to dull, negative, endless Sundays.

Although it was not until the twelfth century that the word Sabbath began to be applied to the Christian festival of the Lord’s Day, this negative Sabbath of comparatively modern times seems to have originated in the bitter religious strife of the seventeenth century. In Scotland at that time, for example, one poor wretch was dragged into court for smiling on the Sabbath. One commentator has suggested that considering the state of Scotland in his day he should have been congratulated for managing to smile at all. The fact is that, in general, seventeenth century Puritans tended to prefer the heresy of Manichaeism believing that time itself is evil, and that the Lord’s Day alone was good - an oasis in the desert, as it were.

This brings us to register that this fourth commandment is the one of all the ten that seems most fundamentally changed by the coming of Christian faith into the world. For, as is well known, Christians do not keep the Sabbath as the seventh and last day of the week, but as the Lord’s Day on the first day. This change is not simply an arbitrary shift; it is saying something fundamental about what is radically new in Christian faith. What is new about this relocation is the recognition that now there are no special sacred times, sacred days, sacred places, sacred things, sacred people, because the announcement of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the declaration that the whole world is now under his lordship. Consequently, everything in creation - that which formerly was regarded as being totally secular, that from which the sacred was “set apart” - is now set free for the service of God; not 1 day out of 7, but 7 days out of 7, 365 days a year.

So, it was that the sixteenth century Reformers could say all sorts of startling things which those who then, and subsequently, venerated Sunday as “the Sabbath” would surely find amazing. Martin Luther, for example, says of the fourth commandment: “*This precept, so far as its outward meaning is concerned, does not apply to us Christians.*” And perhaps even more electrifying: “*If anyone says the Lord’s Day is made holy for the mere day’s sake, or anyone anywhere sets up its observance on a Jewish foundation, then I **order** you to work on it, to ride on it, to dance on it, to feast on it, to do anything that shall remove this encroachment on Christian liberty*”.

What is striking here, in view of what was soon to happen, is that the Reformers of the sixteenth century did not see any direct connection between this fourth commandment and the observance of the Lord’s Day: God has not commanded “the Lord’s Day”, it is the Church which has chosen to keep the first day of the week. Any other day might do just as well. John Calvin actually considered keeping Thursday instead. But it was as well, he concluded, to keep to the usual day. Scarcely surprising is it, then, that on one occasion John Knox visited Calvin in Geneva one Sunday and found him playing bowls.

These anecdotes simply show that even the past situation is not as many people in former days imagined, whether inside and outside the church. It is, therefore, more important to ask: how are we to get to the heart of this commandment? Most powerfully, perhaps, by reflecting on the whole context in which it is located in Exodus 20: 8-11:

‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day, therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it’.

To the creation itself, therefore, there belongs this particular rest of the seventh day, in which the living God gives himself a place to be the free Lord of that which is his. Now it appears that even today, after centuries of Biblical scholarship, the vast majority in our society, or indeed many in our churches, have no idea how to hear a text like this. Having encountered fundamentalists who imagine that the first chapter of Genesis is factually true as chronology, the thoughtful can only grimly conclude that it is ‘not literally true’. That’s more than a shame! This is to give up far too soon. Much better to say that it is literally true *because it is metaphorically true* – the “letter” of the text is true literally - but as metaphor! Another illustration of how hard it is for Christians to find a literary home in this technocratic culture.

This is how it goes as true metaphor. We can liken the imagery of these first six days to the building of a theatre, in which the drama of human life is to be played out. First, there is the building of the theatre itself, the heavens and the earth; then the stage, the separation of the land from the sea as a human dwelling place; then follow the props for the play: the sun, moon, stars, trees, plants, and animals, until finally, on the sixth day, the actors, male and female humanity, step onto the stage. Here the limit is reached. Human beings are the crown of all that has to this point been called into being. Everything has come about with an eye to this eventual appearance. The stage has been set for us. All that we need is at hand. The play is about to begin. And now Israel’s God, as it were, relaxes, assuming sovereignty over the world, celebrating joyfully all that has received the divine imprimatur: that it is “Good”, and of the human “actors”, that they are “very Good”. For it is as the Lord of *this* world, and the Lord of *human life* whose master he has now become, that he takes his rest. This was the day to which the previous six

days were moving: the day when God committed himself to the world, and to humankind, by blessing the seventh day and hallowing it.

Can we see what the benediction of this text means for us? *The seventh day for God is the first day of our life.* We now, like God, not only have time, but we have the same sort of time that God has. This means that God's seventh day, which is *our* first day in the world, has for us the same meaning that it has for God. And this means for us that it is first of all a day free from work. This is radical benediction: that we who make our appearance on the sixth day find that on the seventh - to say again, our first day in the world - that it is a day not of work, but of rest with God in this celebration of what he has given. All that is in our world receives God's benediction. Everything is good. All is grace. This is the intention of the Sabbath.

Our life, then starts with a holiday, with joy and celebration, with the gospel, for it is life with God. With God, our first day is a day of rest, not of work. Our time begins with freedom, not with obligation. It does not start with a work day, with toil, with life under the law. These other things will all come, but when they do, they will be secondary, additional to what is primary. All this is simply to register that our first consciousness is that we belong to God, just as God's final declaration of the Creation is that he belongs to us. So, we who do not witness God's creation, who enter his world without any say of our own, find that our first call is to rest with him, celebrating by imitation in joy and freedom all that has been given.

The apparent destruction of the Jewish Sabbath day by Jesus was precisely to make this point - that we should be made free to hear the meaning of all the claims made on our daily life, and the relentless activity of the world. By his victory, every day became, and becomes, a "Sabbath" day, so that the original Sabbath day as such was made out of date.

It is evidence of how much the resurrection of Jesus meant to the first Christians that it caused them to change the celebration of freedom from the seventh day to the first, or perhaps better, the eighth. "Sunday" became the sign of a joyful new beginning, a day of rejoicing, for the day that changed all history, and for the presence that can fill the least significant thing in the world with meaning. But not only the present. As we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews, the early Christians saw the fulfilled intention of the ancient Sabbath also as a future projection taking place as the resurrection from the dead in the last days, as "the Sabbath rest" that belongs to the people of God.

The question to us then is inescapable. How can Sunday in a radically post-Christian culture again be the sign of this transformation, and so a sign for every day of the week? Not so long ago, contemporary Western society was described as "nihilism with a smiling face". Given daily media attention to increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, that may be too optimistic an assessment. At the very least, nothing, it seems, transcends our week any more, no sign of any "beyond" breaking into our midst - just the pursuit of "one long round of pleasure" for the affluent, and "one damned thing after another" for the rest. Perhaps in the end the greatest contribution Christians can make is to demonstrate how Sunday represents total renewal - of a week filled to the brim with reconstituted time. If Christian faith has indeed transformed the ancient commandment so completely, we can always do better at practising the freedom and "rest" which Sunday is intended to celebrate.

Rejoice roundly then in this fourth commandment, transformed for us, and for everyone in our society:

*“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery” (therefore)
“remember the (reconstituted) Sabbath Day to keep it holy”.*
