

## The Unpreached Sermon

I Samuel 3 vv 1-10, Psalm 139, II Corinthians 4 vv 5-12, Mark 2 v23 – 3 v6

The sermon I had prepared for Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June turned out not to be the one that was needed at either St Michael's or St John's. Here it is and if you read it you might accuse me of casuistry or legalism or think I'm just plain weird! The previous Sunday I had done something I hadn't done for thirty or more years. I had performed some heavy labour in the garden. I don't normally work on Sundays in deference to the fourth of the Ten Commandments, *Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day*. When I was a child, some members of my family were strict Sabbatarians, most much less so, though all of us (as most people did in those days) regarded Sunday as in some sense special. It was when I was a teenager that I decided that I personally ought to observe the Sabbath by, among other things, not doing homework on Sundays. It actually suited my nature very well to get homework out of the way on Friday and then forget about school till Monday morning. I told some friends what I had concluded and they said, *Fine, but the Sabbath is not Saturday, but Sunday*. They were Seventh Day Adventists. True enough, the Sabbath in the Bible is the seventh day of the week. It was the early Christians who changed it to keep the holy day on the first day of the week, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Jewish people, of course, keep the Sabbath on Saturday. Edwina Curry (the "egg lady" and close friend of John Major) came from a Jewish family which ran a delicatessen in Liverpool. They were closed on Saturdays, but Catholics called in for their breakfast after Sunday Mass.

There is a lot to be said for a day off every week, a day of rest, a time for the family, a day especially consecrated to God. The late Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, said that the seven day week with its recurrent day of rest is one of the greatest gifts that the Jews have given to the human race. Without structure and rhythm, life is just one thing after another. Former Lord Chancellor, Lord MacKay of Clashfern, strictly kept Sunday as a day of rest even when he held one of the highest offices in the land. He declared that, having a proper rest on one day of the week, a holy day, enabled him to achieve more on the other six days. It makes sense.

Now, until I came here, I had not regarded gardening as work. To me, horticulture had always been a hobby and therefore perfectly permissible on holy days. Indeed, when I was curate at Orpington, I was quite annoyed one Good Friday when a passer by criticised me for cutting the grass on the holy day. I had already attended Mattins, Litany and Ante-Communion, led the Family Service and participated in the Three Hour Devotion. Surely, I was not committing sin by mowing the lawn before Evensong! Opinions differ on Sabbath observance. St Paul would say two things about this. We should all be guided by our own consciences on these contentious matters and we should not find fault with but support those whose consciences lead them to conclusions different from our own.

So why did I change my mind when I came here and deem gardening work rather than recreation? For one thing, the Rectory Garden is huge and much of the task of keeping it in order is hard work. That's not the main issue, however; I enjoy exercise in the fresh air. The principal point is that there were so many things I had to do as Rector. If I spent my leisure time doing the garden, I would have no time to myself. I need to discipline myself to do nothing, to rest, to visit friends, to undertake genuine leisure activities, to take up His invitation, *Be still and know that I am God*. I must not use precious time off to mow the lawn or cut the hedge. But nowadays, I am much more relaxed than I was thirty years ago. I'm under much less pressure. So, paradoxically perhaps, I am now free to regard gardening as a leisure activity.

Many clergy houses have large gardens. The Archdeacon himself said that he would not expect clergy to give up their days off to spend on garden maintenance. A vicar I knew and his wife moved into a parsonage with a large garden. They had been town people and were appalled at the prospect of having to care for this huge plot. They resolved that they would only keep it tidy and do so in "work time". They soon found, however, that they loved gardening and wanted to spend far more time on it than they could justify taking from his work as a minister. They compromised by doing the hard work in "work time" and performed the more intricate tasks which won their garden a great reputation for beauty on their days off.

But what does count as work for a clergyman? Can I really distinguish between working hours and time off? Bishop Jonathan observed on Maundy Thursday, *Ministry is not what we do. Ministers is what we are*. It is

true that at my ordination I was given grace to perform some tasks which other people can't, mainly to do with the administration of Sacraments, leading worship & preaching, and, that as a minister of the Established Church, I have certain legal powers and responsibilities. But everything else I do is what every Christian is called to do: to worship, to pray, to keep the commandments, to care for one another, to share our faith, each to play our own part in making this world a better place.

Moreover, if you are a Christian, you can't distinguish what you do for God from what ever else you may do. If you are a Christian, your whole life is an offering to God. As George Herbert wrote, *Teach me, my God and King, in all things Thee to see, and what I do in anything, to do it as for Thee*. One year, on our statistical return, we were asked how many hours a week lay people (that's Christians who are not clergy) work for the Church? I took the number on the electoral roll (those who formally identify as belonging to these parish churches) and multiplied it by seven and by twenty four. The number I came up with was too big to go in the box on the online form, but all Christians are called to be full time ministers of Christ: in your public worship & private prayer, in your voluntary work for the Church, in doing the job you are paid for, in caring for your family, in going to school or college, in being a useful member of the community, in your leisure activities, all the time in fact. You are certainly working for God when you are arranging the church flowers. So you are when you take some flowers round to a neighbour who is sick or lonely. So you are when you put flowers in the family home to make it nice for the other inhabitants. So you are when you arrange flowers just for yourself and praise God for the beauty. *Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by him* (Colossians 3<sup>17</sup>).

So, if it isn't clear, what counts as work, how do we decide what we can and cannot do on a Sunday? As I said above, we have to follow our own consciences, but how are our consciences informed? We need rest. We need time to ourselves. We need time for family and friends. We absolutely must have time for God.

As a boy, I would be discouraged from playing cards or singing vulgar songs (like Henry VIII) on Sundays and I would argue that, if it was sinful to do these things on a Sunday, it must be sinful to do them on week days too. Sunday isn't a day to be kept pure so that you can behave in a manner unworthy of a Christian on week days. Keeping Sunday as a holy day sanctifies the whole week. The time we spend with God on a Sunday, our rest and recreation (re-creation?) make us fit to live as Christians throughout the week. So, what we might feel we should give up doing on a Sunday is not simply what is wicked. We shouldn't do wicked things on any day of the week. Working is certainly not wicked. Nevertheless, it is our duty to rest as much as it is to work. This can be insidious, however. Because what we ask people to give up on Sundays is often profitable work or innocent pleasure, it can be hard to understand why we are asking it of them. If a man said to me, *We shan't be in Church on Sunday because I'm taking my boys to rob a bank*, nobody would be surprised if I told him that he was wrong. But. If he had said to me, *I shan't be in Church on Sunday because I am taking my boys to the football*, could I tell him he was wrong? Would you support me if I did? Back to Orpington on Good Friday. I might see nothing wrong with cutting my grass on the holy day, but I was offended by notices indicating that the shops would be open on the *Bank Holiday*. *Is it nothing to you, ye who pass by?* asks both the biblical text and the Good Friday hymn. Those lads who go to the football on Sundays instead of Church are that much less likely to learn about Jesus, to hear the Good News, to understand the importance of prayer, to enjoy Christian fellowship, to partake of the Sacraments, to know God's commandments, to find meaning and purpose in life and to know what awaits them on the day of their death. Without their contribution, the Church will be that much weaker and less effective in serving God and the wider community.

As you know, my official retirement date falls this year. I'm trying to get the bishop to let me stay on longer, but I shan't be here forever. It is my fervent hope that, when that time comes, there will be a new minister to carry on God's work in this place in succession to more than a thousand years of Christian service here. When I go, will the bishop have reason to believe that there are sufficient numbers of members at St Michael's and St John's that appointing a new Rector is good use of the resources with which God supplies us? Keeping Sunday special matters for the Christian growth of the individual & for the life of the Church.