

# Holidays and Holy Days

Trinity 10 – 31st July 2016

## HOLIDAYS

This is the time of year when lots of people are going on holiday and we often find ourselves asking each other, *'Are you going away at all?'*

I'm genuinely interested to hear the answer – there are lots of amazing places in the world. The strange thing is, that despite the fact that many of us spend lots of time looking forward to holidays, planning and saving for them, we do not often think about what they mean for us.

Why do we have holidays at all?

The answer might seem rather obvious – to rest!

Although, I have to say that many family holidays I've been on have been far from restful! Coming back has been something of a relief!

Holidays are important, not just in terms of physical rest, but also in terms of spiritual renewal – the chance to find God in new places and among new people, and to rest in His presence.

## BEING AND DOING

In fact, the original holiday was spiritual.

On the seventh day of Creation God rested. This really is an extraordinary statement. Of course, God doesn't need to rest, but it is saying something about the importance of BEING as opposed to DOING.

By resting himself, God commands us to rest.

The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment is to keep the Sabbath holy – if even God rests, then who are we to think we don't need to?

There's an old film called Whisky Galore! About a cargo ship carrying many tons of whisky that runs aground on the rocks off a Scottish island on a Saturday evening. The islanders rush out to the shore to get the whisky, but just as they reach the boat they hear the clock striking midnight and the cry goes out 'It's the Sabbath! It's the Sabbath!' And they look miserable – for none of them could even think of rowing or swimming out to the stricken ship on the Lord's Day as it would count as work. The cargo sinks into the sea and is lost forever.

It is perhaps for the best that such extreme observance of Sunday is generally a thing of the past. But as easy as it is to make fun of this way of doing things (or not doing things), it was a profound witness to the importance of stopping, resting, and focusing on the spiritual.

It is God's wish for us that there should be times of true rest.

Time when we are not doing and instead are just being.

## **HOLIDAY HISTORY**

If we look back in history, holidays were always holy days – they were first and foremost spiritual events. In the medieval era you were given time off from work in order to go to church, and to celebrate with the community. The greatest holidays were, and still are, Christmas and Easter when we have several days off from work, but the year was scattered with many other holiday holy days – sometimes connected with your employment or the type of person you were. Carpenters did not work on the feast of St Joseph, and women had a break on the feast of St Anne.

The Reformation changed all that as it swept away the ancient holy pattern of rest and work. The most extreme Protestants of all, the Puritans, didn't believe in holidays at all. Famously they even banned Christmas! They ignored the fact that even Our Lord kept the Jewish feasts and developed a theology in which work was the only source of virtue, and rest was a form of wickedness.

This Protestant work ethic as it is known still has a surprising hold over us. America, the homeland of Puritanism, has the shortest holidays and the longest working hours of any nation – but we are not far behind.

## **DO WE LIVE TO WORK?**

The relationship of rest to work turns out to be a difficult moral issue.

Do we live to work?

Or work to live?

To a great extent, our work defines us. We tend to use the verb 'to be' when talking about our work. So and so **IS** a teacher rather than **DOES** teaching. The problem with this is that if our identity is entirely bound up with our work then who are we when we rest?

It is one of the reasons why unemployment and retirement are so difficult for many people – they create an existential crisis, striking at the root of our identity as human beings. Who am I if I can no longer identify myself as an accountant or a consultant or an architect?

These issues become even pressing in a world where the boundaries between work and rest have become increasingly blurred. If the presence of technology, whether a smartphone or a laptop, enables us to work wherever we are, when we become more and more identified by activity. It impinges upon all the other things that should make up our identity – our family and friends, enjoying the world around us and taking part in things we like.

I was horrified to discover that one of my favourite places – the island of Arran of the west coast of Scotland – now has mobile phone coverage over virtually the whole of the Island – no excuse for missing calls from the Parish!

The serious point here, is that just because we can always be available to work doesn't mean we should be. There is a real danger that we may soon become unable to rest, because we shall always be available to work – and this is quite contrary to God's will for our lives, and spiritually disastrous.

Some nurses caring for terminally ill patients in a hospice were asked what regrets their patients said they had before they died.

They never said:

- I wish I'd spent more time in the office.
- I wish I'd earned more money.
- If only I'd worked harder.

Instead, they said things like:

- I wish I'd spent more time with my family.
- I wish I'd kept in touch with my friends.
- I wish I'd loved more.

## **IDLE WORSHIP**

I was so pleased when recently, a bill to increase Sunday trading was rejected by the Commons. I am as ready as anyone to buy a pint of milk on a Sunday and am very pleased to do so, but there is something of fundamental importance in having one day in the week that is different from all the others. It means that our society is not entirely based on activity and profit, and finds room for the value of family, friend and rest.

Yes, there are some, in fact many people, who need to work all the hours that are possible – but we should ask ourselves what kind of society we are that does not enable people to earn a living from 5, let alone 6 days a week?

Rest – whether it be the Sabbath or any other holiday – rescues us from the idolatry of work.

The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe writes that the commandment to rest is:

*'aimed at the idolatry of work. Just as all idols are the works of men's hands, so this work may always become an idol .. the divine injunction to rest is to stop you being absorbed in your own success story, to prevent you from becoming enslaved to productivity and profit'.*

God's command to rest invites us into a relationship with Him – we might call it idle worship (that is i-d-l-e) rather than idol worship (i-d-o-l) – sorry for the pun.

Jesus makes that quite clear in today's Gospel in the Parable of the Rich Fool:

*'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in abundance of possessions'.*

The rich man thinks that by having and having more, his life has all he needs – but instead it is lacking that closeness to God which is the real treasure of our lives, and which requires some form of rest to attain it.

## **I WILL GIVE YOU REST**

God invites us into a relationship of rest with him, and our going on holiday and our weekly resting is the acceptance of that invitation.

Sometimes, it is only by turning off the phone, unplugging the laptop and seeking true idleness that we can enter into God's rest, which is both his divine example and will. It is the liberty that he offers to all Christian people who have been freed from the slavery of work and the idolatry of commerce. Whether it is 2 weeks in the Bahamas or 2 days in Bognor Regis, it is an opportunity to discover afresh who we are when we are not doing anything in particular, but simply being the people that God made us to be.

*Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.*

*Fr Stephen Stavrou*