

SERMON – 5/9/21
“Godly Stewardship of Creation”

Leviticus 25:1-17

“You shall set the fiftieth year apart and proclaim freedom to all the inhabitants of the land.” (Lev.25:10)

As we have been thinking these last couple of weeks about the Stewardship of Creation, we have been reminded that this is God's world, not ours to do with what we like, that God was very pleased with what He had made but that we have spoiled it by failing to undertake the role God gave to human beings in the way that He had intended, and so today I want to explore with you some of the principles that are given to us in God's Word that will enable us to be good and godly stewards of Creation instead of being part of the problem.

It is a deep longing in the hearts of most human beings to make the world a better place. We each try our best to improve things in those situations where we may have influence. That is what drives people from all backgrounds to enter politics or to get involved with campaigning or charitable work, but in reality there is no perfect political system that will solve all the world's problems. It doesn't matter whether you organise society along feudal lines or under capitalist or communist principles, there are always going to be problems. Feudalism and unrestrained capitalism leaves some people swimming in riches but others at the bottom of the pile and while militant communism seeks to address *that* problem it creates other difficulties along the way. Personal stress, social injustice and environmental devastation can all be found across the spectrum of regimes that govern the nations. So is there no answer?

Well, Jesus' manifesto of the Kingdom of God offers us a radically different answer to anything that human beings have ever dreamed up. You might be surprised that I want to home in this morning particularly on the sabbath principle. The call to keep the Sabbath holy is probably the most commonly dismissed of the Ten Commandments. Most human beings share an abhorrence of murder and stealing and telling lies; few people of faith would countenance worshipping other gods besides the Lord; but keeping the Sabbath – well, that seems to be dispensable.

Jesus certainly criticised the Pharisees for their *legalism* in regard to sabbath observance and in a country like ours that once held very strictly to a

keeping of the Lord's Day there were many examples of a similarly legalistic approach to the matter that cannot be defended, but in adopting the 24/7 culture that we have, perhaps we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, like the French tried to do after the Revolution, when a ten day week was instituted (along with decimal hours and minutes) only to discover that having only one day off in ten made people ill, and as the Communists did after the Russian Revolution establishing a five-day week with one fifth of the population each having a different day off. Even though that meant everyone had one day in five as a day of rest, friends and family members ended up having different days off from each other and society fell apart. Yet in our own culture over the course of the last generation there has been a similar assault on the idea that God's blueprint for human beings can be laid to one side without there being damaging consequences. As work patterns have changed to suit the demands of the Free Market and the convenience of big business, family cohesion has been stretched and physical and mental health have unquestionably suffered.

But there's more to be said on this matter. What many Christians seem to be unaware of is that the Sabbath day is not the only biblical expression of the Sabbath principle. As we read this morning, the Law of Moses also provides for a Sabbath year (a sabbatical) and for the marking of the year of jubilee after seven sabbaths of years.

Until the advent and widespread use of chemical fertilisers, farmers used to let fields lie fallow for a year on a rotational basis so that the ground could recover. The biblical idea of the sabbatical year owes something to that good stewardship of the land, but there is more to it than that, because the sabbatical year was not a rotational thing but a year in which the whole land was to rest and no sowing or harvesting to be done. This was actually a test of faith. How would the people be fed if there was no planting or reaping? Well, everything that the land produced of its own accord could be eaten but, rather like the provision of a double portion of manna in the wilderness on the sixth day so that on the seventh day the people did not have to gather it, so God promised that in the sixth year the land would produce enough to feed the people for two years. The extent to which the people of Israel kept the law of the sabbatical year is questionable and it's worth noting that at the very end of the 2nd book of Chronicles when the people of Israel had been banished from the Promised Land to exile in Babylon, it is written: "The

land will lie desolate for seventy years to make up for the Sabbath rest that has not been observed.” (2 Chron.36:21)

But the Law of Moses also teaches that after seven cycles of seven years there was to be a jubilee in the 50th year when not only was the land to be allowed to rest but where there was also to be a wholesale setting right of things that had become disordered. Any Israelites who had got into debt had to have their debts written off; any who had sold themselves into slavery were to be emancipated; any who had sold their inheritance had to have their property restored to them. In effect, everything was on a 50-year lease and nothing could be permanently sold. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it and whatever God's Kingdom people have they hold not for themselves but for God. No Israelite was to become too wealthy and no Israelite was to become too poor. The Year of Jubilee was the chance of a lifetime to make a fresh start – it restored some semblance of equality between people and allowed a recapturing of the relationship that exists between people at creation.

So what does this sabbath principle have to teach us in our context today and particularly in the face of the environmental challenges that will be addressed in a few weeks at COP26? Let me give you three words on which to reflect this morning and during the course of the next week.

The first word is **rest**. The sabbath principle is about resting. As we read last week, the Lord God Almighty Himself rested from His labours when He had finished the work of creation and if we are to be like Him then for us, too, rest should be a part of our lifestyle. Resting means resting, not filling our time off with yet more activity, however worthy. Be careful to take a proper break from your work: switch your phone off, don't look at your e-mails, have a day when you don't do Facebook or Twitter or whatever you do; just leave the dishes for once; take a walk and lift your eyes to the hills, just stop and listen to your breathing and to the birdsong. Think about what it means not only to rest yourself but to give the earth a rest, liberate those who dance attendance on you and let them rest too. And consider what a difference there could be in society if these principles were allowed to become part of the way we do things. We have seen what happened to CO² levels during lockdown – what if we allowed our planet to rest from pollution more regularly? What would happen if the debts of the poorest nations in the world were written off and they were able to use the money

they currently spend servicing unpayable loans to improve healthcare or education?

The second word is **worship**. The sabbath principle is about giving God His place, about taking time consciously to put God first. Does it matter if you are not at church on a Sunday? In one sense, no, because it is not through legalistically turning up week by week that you will be saved. But your absence from the fellowship does deprive others of the gifts that only you can bring among us and the whole community of faith is the poorer for that. While it is clearly not yet safe for everyone to come to church in person, a time must come when the spectator culture of online worship must be challenged and we have to work again at building an interactive fellowship. The Book of Acts records for us that the first Christians continued together in close fellowship, sharing their belongings with one another, praising God daily and enjoying the favour of all the people. Little wonder it was a church that saw dramatic growth. Think about what it means not only to set apart one day in seven to gather with others to worship but to dedicate the whole week, the whole year to the Lord and to allow a lifestyle of worship to soak into everything you are as an individual and everything we are together as God's people in this community. As we slowly begin to rebuild our fellowship we need to learn that worship goes much deeper than outward forms to inspire a whole way of life.

And the third word is what happens when rest and worship come together – it is **trust**. When we allow the Maker's instructions to take precedence over our own desires – our greed and self-interest – and allow His justice to trump human injustice of whatever political colour, we might just begin to see the fulfilment of the prophecy which Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth – good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed – the jubilee year of the Lord's favour, a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth that one day God will inaugurate.

Jesus said: “The Sabbath was made for the good of man; man was not made for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” If you have drawn near to Jesus Christ and entered in to His life-changing presence, then this is what you are called to do in life: Rest – Worship – Trust. And to let those things impact your stewardship of all God's gifts: your time, your talents, your money, the way we look after the world.