

1. In this year when Paris holds the Olympics, we also know that 100 years ago Paris held the 1924 Olympic Games! Many of you will know the film *Chariots of Fire*, released in the 1980s. It tells the story of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, both sprinters who represented Great Britain at the games. Abrahams, a Jew, ran to overcome antisemitism and was eventually successful in winning the 200m and went on to become an elder statesman of British athletics. Liddell, a Christian born of missionary parents, was best at the 100m, but when finally on the boat to Paris, discovers that the qualifying heats will be on a Sunday. The drama intensifies as Liddell, despite intense pressure and after years of training, decides he cannot compete – he does not want to race on the Sabbath. For those who haven't seen the film, I will leave you to watch it to discover how this story ends; but Liddell never does end up racing on the Sunday. Is Liddell a religious maverick, or is he right?

2. The film came out in the 1980s when I was at school, and then university. In those years, the pressure for shops to be open on a Sunday in UK intensified, and the UK government finally passed a law to allow Sunday trading in 1994. I was a supporter of the Keep Sunday Special campaign, started in 1985, established by a Christian as a voice against Sunday trading.

At university, I was in a college rowing eight. One week, the crew wanted to train on Sunday (I cannot remember why). For a rowing eight to train, you need all eight rowers! I refused. It meant the crew could not train on the water. Fortunately, my crewmates were relatively gentle friends and begrudgingly accepted my decision; but they certainly thought I was a religious maverick! Was I, or was I right? (I am more 'grey' about such decisions now!)

But there is no doubt for me: I think there is less 'sabbath' in society than there used to be, and I think we are poorer for it. Precisely how we each choose to adopt a sabbath principle is a matter for debate. But I am convinced: we all need some form of 'sabbath'!

At the root of much of the debate about sabbath, and our readings today, is arrogance. Our arrogance does not like the idea of sabbath because sabbath says: we can't have it all, we can't do it all, our destiny is not entirely in our hands. It challenges our sense of control.

3. The 10 commandments are recorded in two places in the Old Testament.

In both, the commandment to remember the sabbath and keep it 'holy' – that means special, set apart for goodness and wholeness – is the fourth commandment. It comes as a bridge after the first three (about our relationship with God) and before the final six (about our relationship with others). Particularly in the original Hebrew language, it is a central pivot point.

The 10 commandments are pretty much identical in both versions. The only difference is in the Sabbath commandment in each. In the Exodus version, the justification for keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest is because of creation: God rested on the seventh day in the Genesis creation stories, so we should follow that model, it says. But the version in Deuteronomy, which we heard today, has a different justification. The Israelites are escaped slaves from Egypt, and all they knew in Egypt was coercion, forced labour, and endless work for the Pharaoh. In Deuteronomy, this is the reason given for keeping the sabbath: God is saying, 'Never will I expect of you as the Pharaoh did; if you are to be my followers, I will provide you a rhythm of rest with your work!'

The Pharaoh was arrogant. The Pharaoh expected his slaves to work for him all day, every day. The Pharaoh put himself in the place of God. The Israelites know the true God who does not demand endless work. The Israelites sometimes bemoaned the fact they left Egypt, and always had a tendency to lapse back into a 'slavery' mentality. But God said, 'No! Slavery is about accepting and living with arrogance – and that is not my way, Sabbath rhythm is my way!'

4. Sabbath rhythm is about a deeper truth: it is reminding us that fundamentally, our life is a gift, and it is our role to learn to receive it, rather than to control and rule it.

It is about there being one day a week when we deliberately and proactively remind ourselves of the source of our life and rest and live into that source. That is how our second reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians can help us. Paul gives us this beautiful image: the fact that we carry treasure in clay jars. We are fragile, brittle, easy to break; but if we receive and live in the Spirit, we carry treasure he says. In fact, he says, this is the way it should be: there is no place for arrogance, for pride. The beauty we display – in each of us – its source is a gift from God and depends on us accepting our fragility/brokenness. As Leonard Cohen once sang:

***Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.***

5. And so to our gospel reading. Where is the arrogance in this story?

Jesus is walking with disciples who are snacking along the way from the fields of corn. But it's the sabbath. Strictly, you should not do that on the sabbath according to the Law. The Pharisees challenge him. Why? Because it's not legal? Or because their pride is punctured, as they see a teacher walking around who seems to have more 'natural' authority than they do? This new teacher – Jesus, seems to live life as a gift - unlike them, who are all 'self-made' men.

Interestingly, the example Jesus uses to counter the Pharisees challenge is David and his companions entering the temple. We could say it was supremely arrogant for David to walk into the house of God and eat what was dedicated to God! But it must be that Jesus understood that David received the bread as gift at a time of hunger, not a right he had earned.

The incident is amplified when Jesus then heals on a sabbath. Jesus is saying: the sabbath is a gift to treasure and receive well. It is not an opportunity for legalistic coercion to follow a set of rules, rules which are regulated by some of the holier ones amongst us!

6. Where does all that leave us? For me, there are endless treasures to realise in learning to live sabbath well. I don't think it is black and white, and I think we each need to learn what sabbath looks like for us. What will you do on your sabbath time? We love a good hike and might choose that on our day off. But for someone who does physical labour all week, that is possibly the last thing they would choose to do!

For me, time in front of a computer screen or smartphone is often de-energising. I choose to not look at my phone or computer on our day off. For Sarah, she feels differently. We have to work out what shared sabbath looks like for each of us.

And we move through different phases of life. For those of us in paid work with regular hours, sabbath might look very different to those of us in 'retirement' who no longer have such regulated hours but nevertheless might be very busy with life. I think Jesus' example tells us that we need to learn what sabbath looks like for us, not to be subservient to an externally enforced rhythm.

To close where I started, with the film Chariots of Fire. In the years before the Olympics, Eric Liddell was very committed to his training for running. His devout sister disapproved and said it distracted him from serving God. Liddell even missed a prayer meeting once, which really upset her. But Liddell said something like, 'When I am running, I feel like God is inspiring me to do what I was made to do.'

So Sabbath is about learning to treasure the gifts we are given, and be inspired and energised to live life to its fullness.