

16th Sunday of Year

In today's Gospel Our Lord invites the apostles to come aside and rest awhile. The need for rest is nothing new, but holidays as we know them today are really a product of the industrial revolution. In the Middle Ages holidays were religious events, and before the Victorians abolished them, substituting a handful of bank holidays, there were many such holidays, all the 'red letter' days in the Anglican Calendar. Holidays of obligation enabled the Church to insist on days of rest for those who would otherwise not get them. Until 1917 there were 41 holidays of obligation apart from Sundays, and this does not include local holidays decreed by the Bishop!

Farming, especially with livestock, makes an extended break for no particular reason impossible in the agricultural world. Holidays of this kind were introduced to allow factory maintenance. For my mother, as a small girl in an Essex village before the First World War, holidays meant Scottish relatives descending by train from Glasgow, accompanied by trunks, for free food and sunshine. My grandfather referred to them as top hats with empty pockets. Everything would have been pawned to pay for the holiday. Except for the well-to-do life was very much one of unremitting toil. At least my father did not work on Sundays, even if the working day was 8.00 a.m.-10.00 p.m., except for early closing, when it was 8.00 p.m. My mother was entitled to half a day off a fortnight, after 4.00 p.m. on Sunday. We seem to be heading back that way, albeit with shorter working hours, given the pressure for Sunday to be treated as a normal working day.

In the ancient world the Jews were unique in having a weekly day of rest. Pagans had religious festivals, but times of no work were mostly days when it was thought unlucky, not because rest had a positive value. For the Jews the creation story showed God the creator at rest on the seventh day. While the historical origins of the Sabbath are somewhat unclear, it is evident that this rest of God was given as the motivation. The word means 'come to a stop'. It was not just a question of free time to worship God. Rest and recreation were seen as part of this religious act, and as of value in their own right. It was a privilege to be extended to the whole household, including servants and slaves. Indeed, in later texts failure to observe the Sabbath is threatened with the death penalty. For the Orthodox Jewish home, Sabbath means no cooking or cleaning, no carrying of burdens, journeys only on foot. While Jesus criticises obsession with detail and ignoring the demands of charity, he does not abolish the Sabbath, but reminds us that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. We are to rest in the Lord.

A holiday responds to a natural need, but it is also God's gift to us. By rest and recreation we give glory to God. There is a lot to be said for the American usage – 'vacation', a word that means emptiness. Is this reflected in how we see our holidays, or, for that matter, our Sundays? For Christians Sundays and holidays can be just as secularised as for anyone else. They can be fraught, to the point that we feel we need another holiday on our return! Is this the right way for us to approach holidays? If our holidays leave us drained, something is wrong. Holidays provide free time, an opportunity to do something different, but they do not need to be action packed. They are times for us to rest in the Lord, and be with our family or friends to enjoy their company – a time for refreshment and renewal. We praise God, and give thanks for the gift of time, not just by filling every moment, but enjoying and savouring that gift. Only in this way will we come back renewed to continue our journey in faith until we enter God's rest definitively in heaven.