

# Sabbath Reflections 7

## Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

### Sabbath: The 'Yet to Come'

In the 2012 British film comedy, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, a group of British retirees are drawn to a cheaper and perhaps more exotic life in India as they cope with limited financial resources. The advertised luxury of the hotel turns out to be nothing of the kind. In the face of his guests' protestations, the young Indian proprietor proclaims: 'All will be well in the end, and if all is not well, it is not yet the end!'

We are familiar with the paradox that Jesus' promise of the 'kingdom' is immediately present and yet cannot be fully present while the transience and brokenness of the world remains. There is always a dual celebration, a celebration of *that which is* and of *that which is yet to be*. This is also true in our understanding of Sabbath, for Sabbath is fulfilled through Jesus' declaration of the Kingdom.

In his book *God in Creation*, Jürgen Moltmann speaks of Sabbath as the feast of creation, the reason for creation's existence. He goes on to argue that Sabbath rest is essentially a celebration of the presence of God in creation.

'If we combine the two – the Sabbath as the completion of Creation and the Sabbath as the revelation of God's reposing existence in his creation, then these two elements point beyond the Sabbath to a future in which God's creation and his revelation will be one.'<sup>1</sup>

Let us briefly trace the biblical story of God's 'reposing' in creation. In the second creation narrative, God is clearly present and speaks with Adam and Eve who 'hear the sound of the Lord walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze' (Genesis 3:8). Karl Barth makes much of the juxtaposition between the inauguration of the Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-4), and the encounter between *adam*<sup>2</sup> and God, in Genesis 2.<sup>3</sup> He refers to Genesis 1, the first creation narrative, as the *external basis of Covenant*; and Genesis 2, as *Covenant, the internal basis of Creation*.<sup>4</sup> Following expulsion from the garden, we have an account of human violence and alienation, along with the ongoing longing for, and equally the fear of, immediate intimacy with God. Margaret Barker, in her *Creation*,<sup>5</sup> argues that the reason for the Temple was the provision of a place from which God reposed/reigned over creation (and potentially all people). Because human sinfulness is incompatible with the holiness of God, the threat of God's presence being withdrawn, as happened in the exile (Ezekiel 10), was ever present. Sacrifice was therefore a ritual to ensure the continuation of God's 'reposing' and therefore of God's blessing.

In the New Testament, God's presence becomes immediate in Jesus. In his death, 'the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom' (Mark 15:38), indicating that access to God is no longer restricted, or its withdrawal a threat. Jesus says: 'Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

The presence of God is the source of the world's redemption: without God there is no unifying presence, no means of dealing with the consequences of human violence and alienation, no logic to the claim that all are equal and should be treated with the same value.

The writer to the Hebrews (Chapter 4) picks up this theme in his argument that Jesus, the crucified, risen and eternally present One *is the Sabbath rest so long promised*. The promise of God's rest inherent in the Exodus was not actualized

1. Jürgen Moltmann *God in Creation*, (London: SCM Press 1984) 288.

2. The generic name for humanity. *adam* (humanity) from the *adamah* (the earth).

3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: the Doctrine of Creation*, (London: T&T Clark 2009), 228.

4. Barth, 41 - 324.

5. Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (Chippenham: T&T Clark 2010).

through the Promised Land. Therefore, it remains an anticipatory hope.

In the writings of Jürgen Moltmann,<sup>6</sup> *Sabbath* and *Shekinah* are related to each other as promise and fulfillment: *Sabbath* the rest of God, *Shekinah* the presence, or dwelling of God. Psalm 132:12f, shows the connection between Sabbath and Shekinah. 'The Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his habitation; this is my resting place forever; here will I dwell.' The disappointment of unrealized hope in Jerusalem gives rise to the promise of the New Jerusalem, the breaking forth of eternity in time, linking beginning and end.

Our Sabbath studies have linked creation and redemption. We have understood the promise of Sabbath as being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. We can, therefore, link Sabbath with Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, to see Sabbath as a window through which we more fully understand what is meant in the proclamation. *The kingdom of God is resting with God in the midst of creation*, the implication of which is illustrated in the various parables of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is blessing that flows from being in relationship with all that belongs to God. (When asked at a press conference to describe Heaven, Desmond Tutu responded, God is very tricky, very tricky, Heaven is where you enjoy forever the company of all that God loves – so best you start practising now!)<sup>7</sup> The Kingdom of God is where all that humankind declares unclean is deemed clean (sanctified) and acceptable by God. (In a vision, Peter heard a voice say to him 'do not call unclean what I call clean,' Acts 10:15). The Kingdom of God is a celebration of Jubilee: a celebration of forgiveness of debt, of the setting free of slaves, of the restoration of the land. The Kingdom of God is the celebration of Sabbath economics, of generous hospitality and sacrificial compassion, of investment in all that builds community, and the rejection of amassing fortunes in barns.

Jesus not only came to proclaim the immediacy of this Sabbath reality, but personified it in his life, death and resurrection. Being the eternal *Logos* (Word) of God, his redeeming can never simply be restricted to personal human salvation. Rather, it is vested in the whole created order in which God rests. Indeed an assumption that humanity is 'saved' apart from the created order is not supported by scripture. Arguably the most well known verse in the whole of scripture is John 3.16. "God so loved the world . . ." William Temple says of this verse:

'No object is sufficient for the love of God save the world itself. Christianity is not one religion of individual salvation, differing from others only in that it offers a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation, but its scope is wider than that, as wide as God's love.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is right that we celebrate, here and now, all that God intends through Sabbath,<sup>9</sup> while recognizing that there remains the hope that finally all things will be redeemed in him. This hope should spur us into constant care and redemption of the whole created order for how can we neglect anything that God purposes to redeem.<sup>10</sup> *All will be well in the end, and if it is not yet well, it is not yet the end.*

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What have you learned about Sabbath in these studies?
2. What is your next step towards engagement with Sabbath?
3. What will 'the end' look like?

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London SCM 1996), 266.

7. National Press Club, Canberra Australia 1993.

8. William Temple, *Readings In St John's Gospel* (London: MacMillan 1959), 48.

9. 'It is only through man fulfilling his role as mediator between God and the world, that the world itself can fulfil its destiny and be transfigured in the light of the presence of God. It is in this sense that man, when he is truly human, is also above all a priest.' Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature* (Golgonoza Press 1987), 40.

10. 'Unless one learns to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in the world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come.' Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning For Modern Man* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux 1951) 74.

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