

Sabbath Reflections 6

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Jesus: Sabbath Life, Fully Lived¹

1. 'For sure the true Sabbath is the person of our Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ.' St Gregory the Great as quoted in Pope John Paul II's May 31 1998 apostolic letter *Dies Domini*.
www.papalencyclical.net/all.htm

At first glance Jesus appears to have a very 'upside down view' of the world and our place within it.

'Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit' (John 12:24-25).

These statements are extremely counter-cultural to people who intuitively work hard for the preservation and promotion of self. Jesus saw it, and lived it very differently. Jesus' death became the sacrament of his teaching; i.e. what you hold on to you lose, what you give away you keep. We should then ask, is Jesus' view totally unexpected, or are their hints of it in the Hebrew Scriptures?

The Sabbath commandment (within the Ten Commandments) is provided twice in the Old Testament, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The reason given for the Sabbath command in Exodus is 'creation,' while the reason given in Deuteronomy is 'redemption' - 'you were slaves in Egypt' (Deuteronomy 5:15). Creation and redemption are the twin and interdependent theologies that emerge from a reading of scripture. God is the creator of all things: What God creates God is also committed to redeeming. Our understanding of creation should always be informed by our understanding of redemption; and of equal importance, our understanding of redemption should be informed by our understanding of creation. On Sunday morning most congregations will receive a sermon about redemption, a sermon that is not always informed by an appropriate theology of creation. A theology of redemption that is not informed by a theology of creation can result in an exaggerated emphasis upon the individual, an emphasis not warranted by the weight of scripture.² In the narrative of scripture, creation and redemption become one in Jesus. He is the *Logos* of God,³ the one 'through whom all things are created;' he is also the one who 'draws all people to himself' (John 12:32). By embracing both creation and redemption Jesus embodies Sabbath which undergirds them both.

Because our narrative has largely been focused on redemption, often with the presupposition of an historical fall, Christians have sometimes been suspicious of science. Modern science has made remarkable progress in helping us to understand the principles that lie behind the workings of creation. Rather than removing God from our understanding of the universe, modern science has helped us appreciate just how extraordinary and awe-inspiring our world truly is. Christians have a timely opportunity to support and encourage our scientists in the confident knowledge that truth in the scientific world is not and cannot be a different truth from that which is believed within the community of faith. Dan Hardy⁴ helpfully suggests that 'Creation' is shorthand for:

Belief in an ordered cosmos created by God, and

The relationship that this creation has to God.

Hardy's first point concerns the arena of scientific research; the second, concerns the arena of theological reflection drawn from biblical revelation.

We can describe the relationship of creation to God (and especially of humankind within creation) as the Sabbath Principle.⁵ Nothing lives to or for itself. Nothing dies alone. All living and all dying should sustain the life of the whole. The problem with the

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007), 25ff.

3. 'It can be understood then why Sabbath occurs on the first day of the week, creation has started again.' Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 46.

4. Daniel Hardy, *Created and Redeemed Sociality*, in, *On being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* Ed. Colin Gunston and Daniel Hardy, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 42.

5. 'In his rest on the Sabbath the creator God achieved his goal, and human beings who celebrate the Sabbath perceive nature as God's Sabbath and allow the world to be God's creation. They heed their own status and value all other creatures.' Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future* (London: SCM 1989), 61.

human condition (choosing the Tree of Knowledge rather than the Tree of Wisdom) is that we refuse to accept this truth, and we live as if we can or should live with our own fulfillment in mind -- as if fulfillment can be achieved through independent striving alone.⁶

Because a life focused on self is a life lived outside the canopy of blessing that Sabbath living provides, the business of our redemption is very costly. Costly, in that restoring Sabbath to the human condition has meant the dying of Jesus. Costly also to those whose lives have been transformed by following Jesus: for they (we) must walk the same path within a world which strives for independent and often exploitative power, and judges success through the prism of accrued surplus possessions.

As noted in study 4, a clue to the ministry that lay ahead for Jesus is given through the description of how it began. Through the temptations, Jesus rejects the obvious ways in which he could have exercised popular influence, becoming a wonder worker and/or powerful ruler (Luke 4). Following his temptations and his time in the desert, Jesus then went to the synagogue and chose to read from Isaiah 61 (see Luke 4:16-21), the Jubilee passage; and in doing so, inferred that the fulfillment of Sabbath Jubilee was his destiny. It was his destiny to restore all things to God, to set free not simply literal slaves, but all humankind, who in one way or another are slaves, slaves of the human condition. His redeeming of humanity was not simply to be a 'spiritual' redemption, but as witnessed in the resurrection, the first fruits, a taking back into himself of the whole created order.

The day of resurrection, therefore, has become the true day of Sabbath celebration, not simply in the sense that the seventh day of the week has been transferred to the first day of the week, but in the more profound sense that what God has always intended is now finally possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Karl Barth puts it succinctly: 'The reason why God refrains from further activity on the seventh day is that he has found the object of his love and has no need of any further works.'⁷ The death and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate expression of divine love, not simply to humankind, but to the whole created order.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. In what way are scientific truth and spiritual truth the same, or different? What are the limits or special insights of each?
2. What does an appreciation of the value of Sabbath add to your experience of salvation?
3. Thinking of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness quoted in Luke 4, what specific temptations lure you or your community? How does Sabbath support you in your struggle?

6. 'What it [Sabbath] forbids him is not work, but trust in his work.' Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* 111.4 (London: T&T Clark 2009), 50.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, the Doctrine of Creation* 111.1 (London: T&T Clark 2009), 214.

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