

# A break for freedom

## Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity – June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024

Readings [Deuteronomy 5.12-15](#) [Mark 2.23-3.6](#)

About this time twelve years ago, incurable romantic that I am, I couldn't wait for the start of the London Olympics. Even now, despite all the money it cost and the drug cheating since revealed, I still think it was the best Summer ever. So I am romantically ramped up for Paris 2024.

One cultural spinoff of London 2012 was a stage version of *Chariots of Fire*, the film about the Paris Olympics of 1924 and the rivalry and teammateship of two British athletes: Harold Abrahams, Jewish, though non-practising, and the victim of antisemitism; and Eric Liddell, Scottish, Christian and very much practising (he would later die as a missionary in occupied China in World War 2).

A hinge in the plot goes to the heart of our gospel reading: it is a dispute about the Sabbath. Early on, in Scotland, we see Liddell tick off two boys for playing football on a Sunday, though – no enemy of fun – he offers to meet them for a kickabout before school the following morning.

What then is he to do when he discovers the heats for his event are to be on a Sunday? Olympics or not, Liddell says that to run would be against God's law. He is summoned to a meeting of the British Olympic Committee: Lord Cadogan, Lord Birkenhead, the Duke of Sutherland, the Prince of Wales – you get the picture; an inquisition, Liddell calls it – and they ask him to bend a little; for king and country. He replies

God made countries. God makes kings, and the rules by which they govern. And those rules say that the Sabbath is his. And I, for one, intend to keep it that way. Now you may not have had time to see the film in the 43 years since it came out, so no spoilers. For us the question is WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? Specifically, WJSR: Would Jesus Say Run?

Sport is one of the things on which we have no words of Jesus, but today we do see his team snacking on the sabbath, and some Pharisees conduct an inquisition. They are not an official committee, more a group of local enthusiasts, but they challenge him about what his disciples are doing and he seems relaxed about it. So, would Our Lord be with Lord Cadogan and the rest?

Let me put in a word for the Pharisees here, and what they were trying to protect. At the heart of the Sabbath, one day in seven as a day of rest, was not a conspiracy against fun but an act of liberation.

The rule, set out in our first reading, is not for the rich to have rest and refreshment at the expense of the poor and powerless, it is for all. It's not just for adults but for kids too; not just for humans but for their animals too. And making the day 'holy', set apart for God who is over all, secures the day for everyone. What a fine idea.

You're being romantic again, you might say: that was then, and we're in a different world now. Indeed we are.

Even in Jesus' day the world had changed. Many Jewish people had to work with – or for – their Roman overlords, who didn't know about the sabbath or didn't care. If you were rich, you could probably keep the rules. If you depended on gentiles for work, the sabbath might be a luxury you could not afford. So the thing that had been a great equaliser and unifier in society was now often a source of division.

Our own day is different again. In the gig economy, many work all hours, in two or more jobs, to try to make ends meet (and often still can't) while others may find (and this is an extraordinary thing in human history) that high pay means longer hours, not shorter.

Meanwhile, what we might call the topography of time has been flattened: the hills and dales of the week are increasingly smoothed into an undifferentiated sequence in which it's possible to behave on a Sunday pretty much as you would on any other day. And there's good in that, you may say, to be able to get a pint of milk on a Sunday when you've run out – not something we could do when I was the age of people in our Young Church.

So, is the sabbath principle effectively dead? Let's look again at the incidents in the gospel reading.

It had long been established that certain things should not stop for the sabbath. One was the waging of war. There will be no Sunday pause in the bombardment of Ukrainian cities today, and there was no sabbath pause yesterday in operations in Gaza and elsewhere in the region. That was the case before Jesus' day, and in our story he turns that principle inside out by defiantly healing, not hurting, on the sabbath.

In the more trivial example of picking grain – and, we presume, eating it – Jesus says that sabbath is made for people, not the other way round. Jesus hints that with his arrival a new deal is at hand – ‘the son of man is lord of the sabbath’ – but he doesn’t abolish the sabbath, he says it’s there to help us flourish.

So that leaves us with a question. If Jesus back then humanises the sabbath so that it really serves human welfare, how might he help us now to humanise our days and weeks, our lives, in which forces perpetually compete for our every day, every hour, so that, if it’s not for working, it should be for consuming, for using, for connecting? In this new world of ours, this seven-day, twenty-four hour world, how can we rediscover the sabbath vibe, a rhythm of work and rest? Two thoughts.

First, our church has just received an environmental award [A Rocha’s [Eco Church Silver Award](#)], and the sabbath principle is a very environmental thing. The Jewish law prescribes one day in seven for people to rest; it also prescribes one year in seven for the land to rest. An earth sabbath.

Our rapacity towards creation is non-stop, and it wounding our world, overheating the atmosphere, killing off species, polluting land and sea, rivers and air. And it is wounding our souls to be caught up in this. So how might you and I create an earth sabbath – an hour, a day, perhaps a holiday, that will give us a break from living in ways that tear up our world?

Some of those ways (travel, for instance) are as old as humanity, but my second thought is about a very modern thing.

The novelist Sadie Smith was on the radio yesterday, talking about how she had come off social media ([This Cultural Life](#), 35.31–40.22). She has done it for ever, and she acknowledged that not everyone is privileged to do be able to do that. But can we manage it for an hour, a day, a weekend? Can we create a digital sabbath?

Why should we? She put it this way: ‘Let’s not wake up [every morning] and take our running orders from Elon Musk.’ We might say, ‘Social media were made for us, not the other way round.’

Let’s remember, none of this is a conspiracy against fun. No, it is a break for freedom. And if we can make those times of freedom holy, set apart for God, then there’s a chance a chance to take our running orders from Someone else entirely.