

## **Mark 6.31: "LET'S TAKE A BREAK"**

[Chelmsford 28 July 2013]

For many this weekend is the beginning of the summer holidays. Schools have finished - families are packing their buckets and spades. OK, some of you are hanging on for Holiday Club, but then, it's 'up and away'.

That will be true for Caroline and myself.

We are not going away next week, because we want two of our grandchildren to attend Holiday Club.

But then on Monday morning 5<sup>th</sup> August we will be literally 'up and away'.

We will be flying out to Sri Lanka for a three week break.

- The first week will be pure relaxation – lying on a beach and looking out on the Indian Ocean.
- The next week we will be more active – exploring the history and culture of Sri Lanka.
- The third week we will be staying in a Christian orphanage, hearing at first hand of the terrible persecution many churches have been experiencing, and ending up at Cinnamon Gardens Baptist Church, Colombo, where I shall be preaching.

We return on Bank Holiday Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> August, ready for the new autumn term

What does the Bible have to say about this British habit of going away in August?

I confess that the Bible has nothing to say about package tours to the Costa Brava, nor about B & B on the Costa Blackpool.

The modern phenomenon of mass evacuation to seaside or country-side receives no direct support from Scripture.

YET the clear message of both OT/NT is = It is right & proper to take a break. Indeed, to take a break is simply taking God seriously.

## **I GOD SAYS: TAKE A BREAK**

### ***1. Exodus 31.12-17***

Here in Ex 31 we have one of a number of OT passages re Jewish institution of Sabbath. God says: "**You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a solemn day of rest (literally a sabbath), dedicated to me**" (31.15).

The division of time into a week of seven days was not a Jewish invention.

It probably originated in Babylon, where the seven days of the week were seven days sacred to the seven gods/spirits of the seven planets.

The Romans likewise assigned a day to each one of the Gods - Saturn, Apollo, Diana, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter & Venus.

While today we name the days of the week after the corresponding Scandinavian gods/goddesses - so, e.g. Wednesday is literally Woden's day, and Thursday is literally Thor's day.

BUT only the Jews exalted one day above the rest - only the Jews turned the seventh day into a day of rest. That day they called the *Sabbath day*. The word 'sabbath' is derived from a Hebrew word which means to "cease".

For Jews the Sabbath was connected with the story of creation  
So we read in 31.17: **I the Lord mad heaven & earth in six days, and on the Sabbath day I stopped work and rested** – literally, I stopped work and ‘took a deep breath’ – or as the NRSV puts it, God rested and **"was refreshed"**

Personally I find it difficult imagining God needs to rest  
For as Isaiah puts it - **"he never grows tired or weary"** (Is 40.28).  
Indeed, according to Ps 121.3-4 God is the great insomniac: **"Your protector is always awake... and never dozes or sleeps"**. God is a being of immense never-ending energy.

However, I have no difficult in accepting that *we* need to rest & have time to draw breath.  
Frankly, I've reached the time of the year where I feel I am desperate for a break.  
The fact is that all of us need to take a break from time to time, if we are to have the strength to survive.

The Greeks used to say, *"The bow that is always bent (i.e. stretched taut) will soon cease to shoot straight"*. We say: *"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"*.  
There needs to be a certain rhythm to life in terms of work and relaxation.  
We see the truth of this in school life: at the beginning of the week children work harder and better. Ask any teacher which is the worst lesson in the whole week: Friday afternoon last period.

We need to take a break - common sense tells us this. So does God's Word.  
God does not want us to be workaholics. To paraphrase the words of the Preacher: *"There is a time for everything... A time to work, and a time not to work!"*

## 2. *Mark 6.7-13, 30-32*

Mark 6 is a very different passage, which at first sight is quite unconnected with the Sabbath principle, and yet nonetheless is very relevant to this theme of taking a break.

Jesus had sent the 12 disciples away on a preaching mission - no details are given, but clearly it was more than a weekend preaching engagement.  
No doubt knackered, they find themselves jumping from the frying pan into the fire.  
It's all go, go, go. Or as Mark puts it: **"There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his disciples didn't even have time to eat. So Jesus said: 'Let us go off by ourselves to some place where we will be alone and you can rest awhile'"** (6.30-31).  
Or as Eugene Peterson expresses it in his paraphrase The Message: *"Come off by yourselves; let's take a break & get a little rest"*.

There are times when we actually need to **get away** and rest.  
Having a rest involves not just stopping work - it can also involve getting away from home turf. Jesus here took his disciples off for a break in the countryside.  
Taking a break is OK.  
Getting away from it all is part of being a man or woman of God.  
"Burn-out" is not part of God's plan.

How do we take a break?

## II GOD SAYS: TAKE A BREAK ONCE A WEEK

In the first place God says, 'Take a break once a week'  
For most of us this means, 'Let Sunday become your Sabbath, your day of rest'.

True, Sunday and the Sabbath are not necessarily the same.

They commemorate two very different events.

- The Sabbath commemorates the end of the old creation – on the seventh day God rested from his labours
- Sunday commemorates the beginning of the new creation - on the first day of the week God raised Jesus from the dead.

The early church would appear to have seen no link between the two - indeed initially they celebrated both the Sabbath and Sunday. It was not until 8C were the two equated.

Although we no longer observe the Sabbath, the principle underlying the Sabbath is still valid.

The 4th commandment is not of temporary value - we still need a regular break even in the 21st century.

In 18th century the French revolutionaries were intent on abolishing everything to do with religion and tried to do away with Sunday: so they introduced a 10 day week - but in the end they had to bring back the seven day week, because the health of the nation was suffering.

They discovered the truth of the words of JX: "**The sabbath was made for the good of human beings; they were not made for the sabbath**" (Mk 2.27)

How do we make Sunday a day of rest?

By making it "**holy**", i.e. by making it "**different**"

1. We can make Sunday different by **making time for God** and coming to church.

In so doing we acknowledge that God has first place in our lives.

And in so doing we bless not only God, but we also bless ourselves. For it is as we come together in worship that we recharge our spiritual batteries.

We also bless ourselves by getting away from the stress of daily life. I thank God that I was brought up in a home where we never did homework on a Sunday. As a result, even when I was faced with exams at Cambridge, on a Sunday I was a free man – free of the need to do revision, for Sunday was a day of rest. Parents, you are not doing your children a favour in allowing them to do homework on Sunday – the very reverse is true..

2. We can also make Sunday different by **making time for others**.

If you have family, then make Sunday the day for the family. One of the advantages of a 10 o'clock service is that young families still have time to go to the seaside or to visit grandparents who live an hour or two's drive away.

But there are other ways in which we can make time for others: Sunday is a good day for exercising hospitality - e.g. having a BBQ & inviting over a new family from the church

3. We can make Sunday different by **making time for ourselves**.

Do notice that there is nothing wrong in caring for oneself - frankly, if we can't care for ourselves, then we are unlikely to be able to care for others.

Caring for oneself may mean getting away into a corner of the garden & having a quiet read - or it might mean going off and playing a round of golf.

But there are times when one day off a week is insufficient.

There are times when we need to be able to "**get away and rest awhile**".

There are times when God says: "**take a longer break**".

### III GOD SAYS: TAKE A LONGER BREAK

How do we take a longer break?

For many of us this will involve having a decent holiday.

For some it will involve camping in the West Country or hiking in the Lake District; for others of you it will involve travel to exotic destinations abroad.

Apart from taking a toothbrush, what else should you take? Let me suggest three things:

#### 1. *pack a bikini*

Incidentally, I am talking to ladies here, although the principle applicable to men.

Lying on a beach and soaking up the sun is a very positive Christian act (providing, of course, we have put on sun-screen).

By basking in the sun we are doing two things:

1. we are admitting our need for a break
2. we are affirming our belief in the goodness of creation.

Two key Scripture texts come to mind:

- Gen 1.31: "**God saw everything he had made, and indeed it was very good**" [NRSV].
- 1 Tim 1.17: "**God generously gives us everything for our enjoyment**".

I.e. there is nothing wrong with having a good time and enjoying ourselves - God wants us to enjoy his world. Not to enjoy God's world is to limit God's work to the realm of redemption - to be like a child having a fit of sulks.

By lying in a bikini - going for long hikes in the country - sailing on the Norfolk Broads - we are affirming that this is our Father's world.

This can be a very spiritual exercise.

It is amazing the number of spiritual problems that arise from simply being run down. Often the best medicine for spiritual depression = to get away & drop out of life for a while.

#### 2. *pack a Bible*

Hopefully I'm not giving you the wrong impression.

To take a break does not mean returning to the flesh-pots of Egypt.

When we take a break from the regular routine of life, this doesn't mean that we have to take a break from God.

If you are going away over the next few weeks, let me encourage you to visit another church. True, it is not always easy when one is abroad – but it is possible.

I, for instance, am very much looking forward to experiencing worshipping with Christian brothers & sisters in Sri Lanka.

And if you're holidaying in this country, don't give up on church simply because you're not in Chelmsford - you may well find that going to another church could be a marvellous spiritual tonic.

But spiritual refreshment is not limited to churchgoing.

Let me encourage you to pack a Bible - for the Word of God can refresh us - and reach those parts that nothing else can touch. The Psalmist for instance says that those who study God's Word are "**like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time, and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do**" (Psalm 1).

OK if you are flying with Ryan Air and worried about weight restrictions, buy yourself a NT & Psalms which you can stuff in a pocket. And then make time to read it – on the plane, by the pool or wherever. Yes, why not put your Bible reading notes to one side - and read straight through a Gospel! Come back spiritually refreshed.

### 3. *pack a book*

Bookshops at places like Gatwick, Heathrow & Stansted must make a bomb. So many people before they board a flight go a buy the latest thriller. And I confess that I too like a decent thriller.

But there is also a place for reading a decent book. The Apostle Paul said: "**Fill you minds with... things that are good and deserve praise**" (Phil 4.8)

The prayer and nurture team have suggested six books this summer. Let me comment on two of them

- First, *Gilead*, a novel which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005. Written by Marilynne Robinson, it is the fictional journal of the Rev John Ames, a Congregational pastor in the small town of Gilead, who knows that he is dying, and who is telling the story of his life for his seven year old son. It is a moving account – which I guarantee you will enjoy.
- Secondly, *23 Days*, subtitled *a story of love, death, and God*. Written by Francis Bridger, an Anglican minister, it is a gut-wrenching account of his coming to terms with the death of his wife, who had only 23 days of life after diagnosis of cancer. It is a searingly honest book, which will grab your attention from start to finish. I guarantee that once you have started it, you will not be able to put it down.

Yes, pack a decent book and add depth to your holiday.

And, even if you can't get away, get hold of one of these books and enjoy a big read too.

So, in summary: All of us from time to time need to take a longer break.

Life can be very demanding.

And even if you are not getting away physically, let me encourage you to ensure that at some time in the year you take a proper break from life's routines - even, dare I say it, from the church's routines.

This is part of God's plan for living. God wants us to take care of ourselves.

He does not want us to abuse our minds and our bodies through overwork.

There is a place for taking a break.