

SERMON FOR

SATURDAY 28 AND SUNDAY 29 AUGUST 2004

St George's Anglican Church, Pearce ACT

6pm Saturday

8am Sunday

10am Sunday

WORK AND THE SABBATH

“Better than Sex” is a new book by Helen Trinca and Catherine Fox. It is about how a whole generation has got hooked on work. Work is now the centre of people's lives, it is a thing they do to make money and meaning.

“Work cannot compete with sex for glamour, excitement and emotion but it's close! It can push away love, deaden our interest in others and flatten our horizons and yet, still be the most important part of our life. For many people, worklife is more fulfilling, empowering, consistent and controllable than sex life – better in so many ways.”

This is an important series of sermons on the nature of work and the Christian life. It commenced with Lynlea discussing God as creator and worker and the fact that work is part of the revealed character of God. The second looked at our Vocation or calling, which is a concept much wider than involvement in a particular job. The third in the series, given last week by Neil, was on relationships as work. This emphasised the centrality of building relationships in our lives and the priority we should give to them. This final sermon is on the Sabbath.

Let me begin by saying a little about work –

As Frances mentioned in last week's Church Bulletin, the subject of work is seldom discussed from the pulpit. William Diehl is reported as saying that he had never felt supported from his church in his vocation as a senior Manager at Bethlehem Steel. The interview series that Frances is running with each of these services is an important part of our understanding of the vocation and work of members of this congregation. It enables us to be in a better position to support and pray for those who undertake a wide variety of activities. Work now consumes so much of our waking lives. Australians are now the second hardest working nation in the world in terms of hours of work. The productivity gains over the last decade have been the result of restructuring our work. We are working harder, longer and more productively. Most jobs have changed with far greater accountability, pressure and

stress. Most people's necessity to work has also increased as a result of massively increasing housing costs as well as other lifestyle expectations rapidly escalating.

It is not surprising that the Bible treats realistically, the materiality of our existence. It is very concrete about work, and has much to say about work. The Bible is filled with stories of peasant workers, their toils, their troubles, their needs, their anxieties, their insecurities and their triumphs, their prayers for harvest, for rain and for nets filled with fish. In the New Testament there are stories of scribes, of rabbis, tax collectors, tent makers, teachers, statesmen, military leaders as well as farmers, fishermen, women in the home, wine dressers, land labourers and harvesters.

What is often neglected in such biblical lists are the stories of those engaged in commercial life. The entrepreneurs, the merchants, the traders, the trustees, managers, fund raisers, bankers and others that deal with money. The New Testament speaks of 'mission' in terms of work. It also speaks of work accompanying mission, and of work being inextricably linked with alms giving or charity, *2 Thess, 3:8-15*. The Bible seems to regard work as natural human activity. Work is designed to accomplish something of what we need and value in life. It is through work that we provide for ourselves and our loved ones, and it is through our work that we contribute something of value to others. There is something both necessary and essentially relational about work.

The Bible reflects theologically on work and does so from its opening chapters. It regards work as a central reality of existence and a basic social reality. Yet work is both a prefallen mandated order for life and at the same time a post fall experience. In its hardship, work is the result of our decision to contest and compromise our loyalty to God.

The notion of ambivalence towards work pervades the Bible. It can be both brute necessity and a drudgery. Work is both part of the pain and suffering of the curse, and at the same time a joy because of the creativeness and significance with which achievement brings. The Genesis accounts of creation reveal humankind made in the image of God with responsibilities to be trustees, given the power of language to name the animals, given the tasks to cultivate and till the earth. We are commanded to care as vice-regents for the world which God has made. God desires to fill the earth. To us is given the stewardship to subdue it, and to have managerial responsibility for it. It is in this sense we act in co-creation with God. Work is a fundamental dimension of human existence and it has been so from the very beginning. In our work we reflect the very character of God. As Lynlea reminded us at the start of the series, the very image and nature of God can be seen from the perspective of work for God is as a worker.

It is God's world and it is God's resources. Our task is one of trusteeship. With trusteeship comes expectations and responsibilities and accountability. Work is, in a sense, the imitation of the very activity of God, and it is through work that the Hebrew notion of "Radah" or rule over is exercised.

The commandment to work, the expectation of work and the necessity of work is repeated throughout Scripture. It is simply assumed we work. Jesus' Parables are suffused with the every day world of work. Paul condemns "idleness" *2 Thess 3:6*.

He exhorts Christians to “useful activity” *Eph 4:28* and criticises those who have “abandoned their work in eschatological expectation” *1Thess 5:12*. He uses the **same** terms to refer to both his apostolic service and the labour by which he earns a living *1 Cor 4:12*. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat” *2 Thess 3:10* and following this Paul, the tentmaker-apostle, urges them to “earn their own living”. In doing so, we do what is right, work is a vocation which accompanies human life.

If work is so important then, what of the Sabbath?

Before saying something directly about the Sabbath it might be useful to have a look at the Book of Ecclesiastes, because it provides wisdom and perspective on many issues but is particularly helpful on work. At its very heart, the Book of Ecclesiastes says that “personhood lies at the bottom of reality”. It is not a philosophical dissertation nor systematic theology. Nor importantly does it contain disembodied propositions. Ecclesiastes says that “God is personal” and is best defined by mystery. Personhood is very hard to lay hold of. As Neil reminded us last week, in the end we all live, work and understand ourselves in relationship. Ecclesiastes reminds us that all die, everything is finite, contradiction is ultimately the place to live, all is temporary, all is fragile. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that narratives are, like the diamond, to be seen and re-seen with new insights, the story never exhausted of meaning. Ultimately one needs to give oneself to the story to understand it. In the stories about work the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that work does not achieve human salvation. In and of itself work cannot mediate between God and humankind. It cannot eradicate sin or reconcile us to God. Salvation is a gift and human calling. Salvation is also more than work. It involves rest and the Sabbath. To live by the Sabbath tells us that work bites us back, that there is ambiguity about work, that of itself work is not complete. Work creates envy and competition, in the end all die and fade away. As Neil said last week, in his tending to those dying, the regrets are never about how we should have worked harder. They are about not making the best of our relationships.

The Sabbath

Recently a number of us have gone to the island of Bali. For the last two occasions that Lynlea and I have been there it has coincided with Nepe or the New Year. On that day, for the whole island all activity comes to a halt. There is no lights, no electricity, no cooking, nobody ventures on the roads or the beaches. All activity stops.

It is a day of reflection, of contemplation, of introspection, a day when one is reminded where one stands relative to the universe. Although this takes place in a very different religious framework (Hindu religion), it nonetheless reminds us of a world that we have long since lost in Australia. When I was a child, Sunday was a very different day from the rest of the week. Apart from the service station and one or two corner stores, the newsagent and a few milkbars, very little was open and very little happened on a Sunday. It was a day given over to church attendance, to family picnics, to going to the beach. Clubs, entertainment and other activities that now dominate our lives on Sunday were very limited. That world has changed. Sunday now is filled with the buzz of shopping malls. It is crowded with major commercial

sporting and other activities. The malls and the stadiums have in fact become the great centres of worship ie our consumption and our entertainment.

What then does the Bible tell us about the Sabbath? The Hebrew word “Shabath” means to stop, to desist, to cease from doing. What is clear when we look at the biblical texts is that the Sabbath belongs to the created order and can neither be legislated nor abolished. In fact, Scripture describes the creation of humankind, Adam and Eve on the 6th day, as the penultimate creative act. The climax is the 7th day, the Sabbath.

It is in relation to the Sabbath, that the use of the word ‘holy’ first appears in Scripture. Nothing is closer to God’s mind and heart than the creation of the Sabbath. Adam woke up from his unconscious sleep, not to start the work of caring for God’s world, but to experience rest. Adam and Eve’s first vocational experience was to “waste time for good and for God”.

Do we make time in our lives to “waste time for good and for God”?

The pattern of work and the Sabbath is found throughout Scripture.

Genesis 2:2 - In *Genesis 2:2* God rested on the 7th day. It was a cessation of activity and also refreshment. But like so many aspects of Scripture, looking at one verse does not give us the whole picture. Scripture builds on Scripture. God progressively reveals more of God’s character for our lives. By the time we get to the end of Scripture the inchoate becomes more complete, the embryonic more “fully formed”.

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) gradually develops a picture of what the Sabbath is about. First it reveals the heart of God (*Exodus 31:17*). It represents refreshment. It provides opportunity to enjoy, to reflect, to spend time being what we are, ie self conscious, reflective human beings. It is also through keeping the Sabbath that we bear God’s image. As the history of Israel developed, the nation of Israel was called to reveal God’s image through its pattern of work *and rest*.

God manifested God’s being in refraining from work and in rest. Here is the divine exemplar. If ethics is about how we live, no principle has greater priority than following God and the pattern of work and rest.

Just as *Exodus* speaks of God’s deliverance, so the Sabbath speaks of having faith in God as a day of rest. *Exodus 20:8-11* reads:

“Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter or your man-servant or your maid-servant, nor your animals nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the Heavens and the Earth, the sea and all that is in them but he rested on the seventh day, therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

We are enjoined in the fourth Commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. It draws attention to the Sabbath as a point of liberation. “Holy” means different, separated, of

special significance. The entire society is to share publicly in the act of worship. Israel rests because God rests. God is not a workaholic. Rest is ordained in the very fabric of creation so that the world is *not* a place of endless productivity, ambition or anxiety.

The Sabbath is also a day of equalisation. It is a day in which social distinctions are overcome and all rest alike. It is in community that all stand together in the created order in Sabbath. Sabbath is designed to honour the creative purposes of God, and to allow us time and space to integrate ourselves into them.

The Sabbath is a day also of change which counter-balances life. “All work and no play makes Jack, or Jill, a dull person”. These days work causes stress, marital breakdown, destroyed relationships. A life oriented by work alone is a life without perspective and with only half its meaning. In the work I do in workplace counselling, I see every day people who have lost perspective and we see the damaging results of this for their lives.

The notion of rest, of a holy and integrating day, of doing things differently on the Sabbath, of counter balancing our lives, takes on more intent as we work through Scripture. The Sabbath is crucially linked to worship. In Deut 5.12 the people of Israel, God’s people, are told to keep the Sabbath day holy as a reminder of their redemption from slavery in Egypt. It provided an opportunity for corporate worship (Lev 23.3, Is 58.13), marked ceremonially by the replacing of the show-bread in the tabernacle, by the offering of lambs, drink and grain (Num 28.9-10). The Sabbath was a “sign” of the everlasting covenant made by the Redeemer with his people (Ex 31.12-17).

The link between Sabbath and worship becomes clearer as we work through Scripture. In the New Testament the Sabbath commandment is not repeated. However Jesus observes the Sabbath, and importantly its intent. Jesus reminds his Jewish peers that Israel was to “call the Sabbath a delight” (Is 58.13). Jesus did not break the Sabbath principle. He attended the Temple, and sought to fulfil the meaning and intent of the Sabbath command. Therefore Jesus healed and gleaned in the fields on Sabbath. More particularly he embodied Sabbath by restoring people to God through forgiveness of sins, healing the sick, and bringing joy. These all foreshadow the time when all will be restored, forgiven and healed: where the Lamb is everywhere and we can enjoy God in uninterrupted communion.

What we learn when we look at the Sabbath throughout the Bible is that it is a unique religious principle. It is not found in other Near Eastern religions. While the deities of the nations around about were associated with places and things, the God of Israel was the God of events. This God of all the gods was the Redeemer of Israel from slavery, the Revealer of the Torah, manifesting in events in history rather than in things or places. In fact Judaism and Christianity are religions of time, and they are aimed at sanctifying time. Unlike the place and space minded religions, where time is unvaried, homogenous, circular or empty, the Bible speaks of the diversified nature of time. No two days are alike. Every hour is unique. Each of us is given each moment, exclusive and full of potential, and therefore unique and precious.

Holiness in our religion is attached to time and to sacred events in time. We are enjoined to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries of time. In this sense Sabbaths are our great Cathedrals. It is to this special day that the Hebrew word “*qodosh*” or “holy” is first used. It implies both mystery and majesty. The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time. Six days we live under the burden of work, under a sense of the domination of things and of space. On the Sabbath we try to be attuned to holiness in time. It is day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time. We turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation. We turn from work to our Creator, our redeemer, our Lord, our God.

May we celebrate this Sabbath together as we continue in worship now.