

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Fifth Sunday after Trinity

20th July 2025

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Dr Victoria Johnson

A poor life this, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.

You might be familiar with this famous line from a poem titled 'Leisure' by William Henry Davies. He hints that if we continue to make work, worry and busy-ness our idol, we experience a kind of poverty, we fail to notice the beauty and joy of the world. We fail to see streams, and stars, nature and friendship and love. And if we can't see these things, how then, will we see need, and vulnerability and suffering? How then, we might ask, will we see the kingdom of God?

Abraham Lincoln said: As we keep or break the Sabbath Day, we nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope by which humanity rises. Suggesting that that the concept of the sabbath, or taking rest, or standing still, is something humanity needs to become fully itself, it is our best hope.

For many people, this time of year signals a change in pace- we are in the season of 'summer holidays' -whether that's a staycation, a caravan in skegness or a trip overseas.

It is good to sometimes step away from our regular routines to re-set and re-orient our lives. Of course, the word 'holiday' derives from the old English 'holy day' –a religious anniversary or 'sabbath' -time which is consecrated to the Lord and sanctified. A holy-day helps us put things in perspective, re-charge, and renew and so enable us to stop and gaze at those important things that might be right in front of us, but which we often miss through busy-ness and distraction. We witness a kind of sabbath in our reading from Exodus this morning. Abraham is sitting quietly at the entrance to his tent in the middle of the day, we are not told what he was doing, why he was doing it, what his intentions were- we are simply told that there he was sat still, being attentive to the world around him.

It is in this moment of quietness and contemplation, that he is visited by three angels. The two seem to be connected. From this position of stillness, he is witness to the presence of God, and he is able, in his turn, offer hospitality and rest to those mysterious guests.

It is from this visitation that Sarah and Abraham learn that they will bear a child- it is not only hospitality that comes from this moment of rest, it is a new beginning and a new life for this elderly couple. They will have descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, and as the sand upon the seashore.

To rest in the presence of God and to keep sabbath, is to be made for contemplation and attentiveness, for freedom and deliverance, for justice and jubilee, mercy and new life. This is a time to give back to God in thanksgiving. A time to rise into our better nature. A time to inhabit the new life to which Christ calls us.

Jesus often goes to a quiet place to pray, and in today's gospel Jesus takes his rest by going to visit his dearest friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary sits at Jesus feet, while Martha worries and rushes about complaining that Mary isn't helping. Jesus says: Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things- Mary has chosen the better part.

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Martha embodies the worry of the anxious host who is unsure that the cakes will rise, or the bread will bake or the meat will be cooked or that there will be enough wine. She is so busy and flustered she misses the party and she fails to 'notice' the Lord of Heaven and Earth sat in her kitchen! Just as Abraham's stillness is receptive to the angels, Mary's stillness makes her open to the word of God. In the busy-ness of this world, Jesus calls us all to deep and profound rest- whether that's a few moments out of our routine, a day off, a retreat, a pilgrimage or a holiday.

Remember his words from Matthew's gospel: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'

St Augustine, the fourth centurial theologian, gives us this advice:

Let us leave a little room for reflection in our lives, room too for silence. Let us look within ourselves and see whether there is some delightful hidden place inside where we can be free of noise and argument. Let us hear the Word of God in stillness and perhaps we will then come to understand it.

Jesus shows us what true rest really is, and of course, it's actually about so much more than summer holidays, keeping Sunday special or having a day off. This rest of which Jesus speaks is about how our whole lives witness to the presence of God. We all need times of rest and recreation, but Christ calls us to infuse our way of life with a bit more reflection, a little more sabbath. It's about how we become truly attentive to the world around us, and receive its gifts, and see its needs. It's how we use our time for God and for one another.

Before he became a christian, St Augustine spent a portion of his life seeking meaning and purpose, he looked in all sorts of places- some of those places and passions were rather dubious and unmentionable. But he kept on searching for those places and promises of the world where he might be still and find peace. In the end, he found what he was looking for when he sat at the feet of Jesus Christ and rested in his presence. He said "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

It is only from that rest, that ruins shall be rebuilt, people will be restored, we will notice the beauty of creation, the sound of birdsong, the flowers of the summer, the soft refreshing rain, we will stand with the lost and the lonely, and be invited to sit around the table of grace, where bread and wine are shared.

Each moment of rest and attention, is a new day, the first day of a constantly emerging creation, a day of hope for future possibilities, a day which witnesses to the power of the resurrection in our lives. Whilst other days fill up the room with vanities, George Herbert, the poet, says, Sunday is a bright day, on which the Saviour rose.

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This is the day which the Lord has made, this day heralds God's glorious liberty, and we should rejoice and be glad in it as we rejoice with little Amelie who is baptised today as a serious seeker after the Kingdom of God, may she find what she is looking for, along with us, the family of the baptised who journey with her.

As we go through this next week, may we find a little time to stand and stare, and be still enough to notice that Christ is already in our midst, and calls each one of us by name, and makes us his own. May our restless hearts find peace, so that we can attend to the world around us in all of its need and brokenness, and rise into our fullest humanity.

To the glory of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit