

Along the track

Rest

One of the earliest images of God the Bible offers is the story about God walking around the garden when the cool evening breezes were blowing, talking with those God has just created. It's a story of contrasts, firstly about an all-powerful God who can create out of nothing but then it is a story about a God who enjoys company, who stops to rest and wander in the garden, to breathe in the damp, fragrant evening air, to delight in friendship and conversation. It's also a story about the gift of creation and what can be done with it by the creativity of a gardener's hands and labour and how they can take the gifts of water and soil and sunlight and use them to make a garden. In other words, what's the point of creation if it cannot be used and enjoyed, what's the point of companionship, friendship if we do not take time to nourish them and enjoy them?

The commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day is more than just about prayer and worship. It is also a reminder of this creation story. It is about making sure that we have Sabbath times in our lives so that we can rest and re-create body and soul and take time to enjoy creation and companionship. Jewish people describe that idea in the expression 'practising shavat'. That is where the word Sabbath comes from. Sabbath was meant for everyone, including their servants and animals and the immigrants or slaves who came to work there.

Every fifty years as part of the law given by Yahweh, the Israelites enjoyed a Jubilee year. The Jubilee year required that the land lie fallow and people rested, and all those who were in slavery were set free to return to their communities and debts were forgiven. The Jubilee reset as it were, was a collective form of rest. It sought to ensure that the people lived in ways that reflect good relationships with God, with each other, and with creation. It was designed to ensure that we cared for each other and for creation.

But for so many today, finding time to rest is becoming increasingly difficult. Work seems to consume every waking moment, often because so many must work two or more jobs to make ends meet. The pace of life is not set for rest and renewal especially when we have immediate access to so much – information, goods delivered to our door, phone calls and social media requiring immediate response. Finding time to nurture relationships, to build friendships is not always easy. Not working for a year or letting the land lie fallow is not an option!

There are so many who work for poor return, long hours in the difficult conditions. Many are the modern slaves.

It may well be a time for a modern Jubilee reset. Rest is precious, a necessary part of life. That is the lesson of Genesis where we become more conscious of how God reaches out to each of us in friendship and how we nurture that. It means being more conscious of the beauty and wonder of creation and our power to care for it or destroy it. It means being more conscious that we are not meant to be alone but to live in community and for community. It means supporting workers in their quest for decent pay and conditions so they don't have to work so often and for so long. There are so many who work long hours for little pay, in the hot kitchens of our restaurants, delivering our meals, working endlessly just to survive. It means campaigning against companies that exploit workers, and investigating supply chains that use slavery and exploited labour to produce their products.

In the words of Pope Francis:

If we learn to truly rest, we become capable of true compassion; if we cultivate a contemplative outlook, we will carry out our activities without that rapacious attitude of those who want to possess and consume everything; if we stay in touch with the Lord and do not anaesthetise the deepest part of ourselves, the things to do will not have the power to cause us to get winded or devour us. We need — listen to this — we need an “ecology of the heart,” that is made up of rest, contemplation and compassion.

Paradoxically, there is a lot of work to be done if we are all to find rest. But it is possible, in fact it is necessary. Rest has been robbed from so many of us, and we need to work to get it back.

Regards
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