

'My father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17)

There was a time when the question of working on Sunday was controversial.

Let me illustrate. It is Sunday 24 June 1855 and huge crowds have gathered in Hyde Park. They are angry: hissing and booing at the rich as they drive past in their carriages. The following Sunday the crowds have swollen to 150,000. The police are out in force supported by a few soldiers – there are clashes between them and some are injured.

The crowds on both occasions are furious at the restrictions of Sunday laws and the blatant hypocrisy of the aristocracy who are ignoring them:

'... The people shouted, hooted and hissed and yelled at the carriages of the rich, crying 'Go to church!!' 'Why allow your servants to work on Sundays?' or 'Down with the Sabbatarians!' 'Away with the Sunday bill!' (Owen Chadwick *The Victorian Church* Pt 1 p 465)

The question of Sunday observance had been gathering force ever since it was decreed that Crystal Palace would be shut on Sunday. Since then the Sabbatarians – a diverse group of leading non-conformists and Anglican evangelicals (notably Lord Shaftesbury and Archbishop Sumner), had campaigned to tighten up on Sunday laws, especially in the big cities.

Despite existing laws, the reality was that in London at least more than half the shops were open on a Sunday in the mid 19th century and that would increase, despite legislation.

The Sabbatarians argument was simple. God had decreed in the 10 Commandments that there should be a day of rest when no work was to be done. They interpreted this to mean that Sunday should be devoted to worship and that no secular activities should take place.

I expect you have come across books stamped inside 'Sunday reading' and can remember back to the time before 1994 when Sunday really was 'silent Sunday'. I also recall having a lively church debate at St Botolph's Cambridge (where I was LLM at the time) about our views on allowing shops to trade for restricted hours on Sunday.

Of course the situation in Victorian England and in a radically more secular Britain today is in many ways very different. But the protests of the crowds of ordinary people at Hyde Park still point to an important social issue which lies at the heart of what Sunday should be.

The Hyde Park crowds were angry that having laboured six days, they weren't then allowed to be at leisure, to go to entertainment, attend concerts and yes, see the extraordinary exhibits of human endeavour at the Crystal Palace on a Sunday.

Their protest is as true today as it was then. As a matter of social justice there does need to be a day when families can gather and people can find time for recreation.

So, it is significant that of all the controversies which Jesus faced in his own day, the Sabbath cropped up more frequently than almost any other issue. Attitudes to Sabbath observance were a shibboleth of where one stood in relation to God, covenant and Israel. The rabbis and Pharisees of the 1st century had developed 39 definitions of 'work' and those who deliberately flouted them, especially people who had religious authority such as Jesus, were very close to being considered blasphemous.

The synagogue leader in the Gospel reading today (Lk 13:10-17) thinks that he is maintaining the sanctity of the Sabbath when he opposes Jesus' healing of the crippled woman. Jesus' answer is interesting on two levels.

First, he points out the obvious hypocrisy of the Sabbatarian position which permits 'work' by attending to livestock but forbids attending to humans.

But it is the second point which is more shocking and surprising. Not only is it right to attend to human needs on the Sabbath but it is *necessary* to do so. In Greek 'ought not this women ... to be set free from bondage' (Lk 13:16) is even stronger, it says it is in fact *necessary* (dei) for her to be freed from her oppression *and* on the Sabbath, the day of renewal.

The point is made even more forcibly in John's Gospel. Jesus' response to his critics for healing a paralysed man on the Sabbath is, that if God never stops working in creation, then he is justified in doing the same. In other words, the Sabbath is a model of society reformed, which is the Kingdom of God on earth.

So, what we learn from Jesus is that it is not Sunday/Sabbath per se which is the issue – would we really, even if it were possible, want to return to 'silent Sundays'? The issue is how do we, as Christians, implement the social and spiritual gospel of good news as preached by Isaiah as well as Jesus. Isaiah says our Sabbath duty is to 'give food to the hungry' (Isaiah 58:10). I take hungry here to mean those literally hungry but also those who are spiritually hungry. We may live in a secular age but that does not mean that people are less spiritually needy, if anything they may need it more.

Our role as Christians is not to be life kill-joys, as I am afraid the Sabbatarians were, even great social reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury. But rather we should be bolder in our dealings with others about the Christian message.

Let that be our sabbath duty everyday of the week. For if God works in creation at all times, then we should also be working to make the Kingdom of God a reality every day of the week.