

## *Sabbath, set free...*



*An Open Door... An invitation*

We are coming into that strange time, nearing the end of the school holidays, when many of us will remember as children a certain sense of emptiness, or even .. boredom ... setting in. The American psychoanalyst Adam Philips, writes on this<sup>1</sup> and says that boredom is an important part of a child's development – a space where they learn to reflect. Learning, if you like, how to cope with who they are, and where they are – and how to identify what their longings and fears truly are, and live to be who they are meant to be.

As adults we often seek to banish 'wasted time' from our lives – empty time, or even time for rest and play. Life can so often be dictated by what we have to do. Or what we feel we have to do. Our identity can become tied up in our activity – in what we have achieved or not achieved, in how we are perceived by others, and how we live up to, or earn, that regard. Our world shrinks, narrows down to what we achieve, and the noise with which we fill the spaces between achieving things. This can lead to an inability to be still. To scrolling social media, or staring mindlessly at TV... filling those empty hours, and that exhausted

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<sup>1</sup> Essay – 'on being bored' in the collection of essays titled 'On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life'.

space with anything that distracts us. We run the risk of becoming burnt out – exhausted.

Anyone who loves music, or reading aloud, acting, or being creative with art, knows that the rests and clear spaces are as important as the notes in music, the words in a speech, or the colours on the page. Empty space is where we sense the significance of what is unfolding around it - its glory, or the questions or challenges that it might offer.

God invites us into a time when all we have to do is be ... to learn who we are, and where we are, our longings, and our fears... and how to live to be who we are meant to be.

... a space in which we are set free.

Jesus uses that phrase, *set free*, twice in our passage today about the woman who is crippled and bent over under her burden. *Ought not this woman to be set free?* he asks, and then he proclaims her as *set free*. And he presents a challenge to us, on what Sabbath is, and its place in our lives. It's a recurring theme in Jesus' words in the gospels. Sabbath and being set free.

Now, being set free is not always straightforward. Many of you will remember the story I tell of the dog who ran in tight small circles when taken for a walk in the fields, because he was so used to being in a cage that the thought of running free was impossible. Or the story of the Israelites in Exodus who struggled with the self-regulation and vulnerability of their freedom from slavery and who even asked to return to that place where at least the food was certain even if their minds and bodies were not allowed to flourish and grow.

We often struggle with empty time. Struggle with what meets us there. Or even to give ourselves permission to have it at all. And yet in the bustle and exhaustion of the world in which we move, and of our own hearts and inner landscape... we really need space to meet and confront the things which weigh us down, and limit us – scars from the past, or challenges of the present. To know that we are worthy, beloved, in God's eyes just because we exist, and to allow space for God to breathe and nurture life, strength and growth within us.

The woman in today's gospel is bent double under her burden, unable to stand up straight. Our burdens can weigh us down so much we cannot see the wider view, the horizon, the next step on the way. Our worlds can be consumed by the little patch we see at our feet. We become incapable of looking at each other properly, or even at ourselves in the mirror, as we labour under our pains and sorrows.

Jesus comes into her pain with his Sabbath. A Sabbath that sets her free and lifts her up. And yet also a Sabbath that allows space for the leaders of the synagogue to hear Jesus' challenge to them. Sabbath is for helping us to learn the habit of receiving and sharing love, of resting in the work that *God has already done, and in the love he has already poured upon us, and holds us in every moment of our lives.*

As we discover in Sabbath that we don't have to carry our burdens alone, and that we don't have to burden ourselves with heavy burdens of activity to prove our worth to ourselves, or to God... so we leave space for him to meet us in our pains and struggles, and set us free. Free to praise like the woman in the story. Free to let go of the rules, and to share his love wildly and widely. Free to imagine other people's needs and perspectives. And to share his love and joy together.

Sabbath is a time for relishing – for taking time over the joy of living – of being still and breathing, of creativity, and renewal. Of enjoying food, company, conversation. Of re-orienting our hearts to love and wonder.

It was from the Sabbath Day onward that God invited humanity to join him as Stewards in his Creative endeavour. Sabbath calls us into God's role of blessing in the world – to be able to see and name goodness and life. To grow as people who can live life to its fullness, and people who can share that life, that hope, that healing, that possibility, within the brokenness of humanity.

God knows we need it. He knows our tendency to tie ourselves in knots, in drama-spirals, in pain, in over-busyness... and to lose the love, the joy, and the slow heartbeat that he longs us to know and share. Right from the beginning of our scriptures he calls us to Sabbath – to One in Seven.

To a rhythm of activity and rest, of breathing in and out... One breath in seven, one hour in seven, given to our foundations, to taking in nutrients, to growth and healing ....

And if you're not sure how to start, remember the woman in our story today. All she did was be there. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue and just then there appeared a woman, begins our story. She just rocked up. Jesus did the rest.

The poet Wendell Berry, wrote this extraordinary poem about Sabbath, about what Sabbath might mean for us, releasing the song God places in our hearts. I'm going to share it with you now, followed by a short invitation poem from the poet Nicola Slee...

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.

Live like the rain: taking its time,  
in no hurry to stop, drenching  
the thirsty ground, simple and serious.

Live like the garden: soaking it up,  
taking the goodness deep within,  
giving back beauty deep and green.

Live like the cat: stretched out  
under the rosebush, giving herself  
to sleep in the delicious morning.

Live like you believe in your life – even  
love it: like it's the gift you say it is,  
not any kind of punishment.

As you go backwards and forwards  
up and down the garden path  
living the life you are called to love.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nicola Slee, 'Sabbatical'