

## **Sabbaths and Sabbaticals**

Our Anglican minister at St Michael's, Gillaine, is on sabbatical until mid-September, and that has made me think about sabbaths and sabbaticals.

Observing Shabbat (Sabbath) is a vital part of Jewish life: enshrined in the Ten Commandments, observed from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, it remains not only a duty, but a source of great joy for Jewish people today. Like so much else in Judaism, it is a family matter; something centred on the home, even though synagogue services are also held. There are related customs in the Bible: the Sabbath year described in Leviticus, and still observed in modified form in Israel, where land is left fallow and debts forgiven, and the Year of Jubilee, observed at the end of seven cycles of seven years, in which slaves would be freed, debts written off and land returned to its original owners. Scholars argue about whether the Year of Jubilee was ever actually observed, and it certainly hasn't been since at least the exile (roughly 600 BC), but its theological and symbolic significance is great. We remember how Jesus said that humanity was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for humanity – well, everything about Sabbath, Sabbath years and Jubilee shows an awareness that God does not want us to be caught in an endless cycle of toil, stress, and possibly falling into debt and losing the securities of freedom and a place of our own.

The history of the Christian Sabbath is an interesting one. For most Christians Sunday, usually thought of as midnight to midnight, has been thought of as the Sabbath. That is, of course, because it is the day of Resurrection: a day to celebrate God's ultimate victory. How that is to be observed has been a matter of debate. Many of us remember a time when no shops were open on Sundays; in some communities drinking alcohol, dancing and playing cards were banned on Sundays, and for many church attendance, often morning and evening dressed in our Sunday Best was the rule. For some that was a joy, and a blessed relief from the week's work; but for others, it suggested a dour, fun-hating attitude and soured their attitude to faith.

Many things have changed; we have some restrictions on shops' opening hours, but most Christians think nothing of a trip to the supermarket on a Sunday, quite often after church in the morning. The clothes many of us wear in church have become much more informal, and in society as a whole Sunday is a day of sport and leisure more than worship.

We cannot turn back the clock to a time of closed shops and bans on sports practices. But perhaps there is something we can do, if we think Sabbath rest is important.

Do you know the film, *Bruce Almighty*? Its director, Tom Shadyac, is a committed Christian. I think it is a surprisingly wise film. Bruce Nolan, played by Jim Carrey, is temporarily given God's powers, and not surprisingly, makes a complete mess of things. At the end of the film, God, played by Morgan Freeman, tells the now chastened Bruce to Be the Miracle: he isn't to wait for supernatural solutions to the problems of the world, but to take the initiative to do God's work. Bruce takes up the challenge and spreads the Be the Miracle message to others as a TV reporter.

Can we Be the Sabbath Blessing? Sabbath, and Sabbatical times, whether three months long, or as a three day retreat, or a regular weekly Sabbath, teach us to put human work, busyness, earning money and rushing around in their proper place: we should work to live, not live to work. Life involves rest, and family joy, and worship, and time to simply be, not do. If we care about such things, let's learn from Bruce Nolan's example, and Be the Sabbath Blessing.

First of all, let's make sure our own house is in order. Whether or not we take Sunday as a traditional Christian Sabbath, let's make sure that we do have a regular, weekly Sabbath rest. It could be another day off: for many of us, Sunday is a very busy day, with church activities. It may be that we need another home day. For it to give us Sabbath rest, we don't need to forego pleasurable activities, but we do need to consciously acknowledge God, to thank God for this protected time, to treat it as sacrosanct, holy, joyful. Many of us also take retreats, whether guided or purely contemplative: these too can be a regular, perhaps yearly part of our Sabbath rest. There are many wonderful retreat houses where we can go for a few days of guided time dedicated to God. My favourite is Lee Abbey in Devon, but there are many more. If going away on retreat is not possible, there are now a number of online retreats we can take part in, giving up an afternoon or more to join a video link to explore some aspect of our faith. Many churches organise Quiet Days, which also have a Sabbath quality.

If we are regularly enjoying God's gift of Sabbath rest, in whatever form, then if someone asks us what our faith means to us, or why we are Christians, that could be something else to mention. We are used to the idea of sharing the Gospel of God's salvation, of the Cross and Resurrection, but we could also share the good news that our God cares about our well-being enough to have told us to take regular time for ourselves, time of rest, thankfulness and joy.



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### **Resources/Good News**

#### **East Anglia District's Year of Prayer**

In East Anglia, the District has decided to dedicate 2023 to prayer. District Chair Rev Julian Pursehouse notes that 'Prayer is the very heartbeat of the Church and therefore vital to its life and health!'

[Read more on Methodist.org.uk](https://www.methodist.org.uk)

[Watch the video here](#)