



Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 31 July 2011

Work, rest, generosity and imagination

A sermon by Revd Will Morris

Readings: Romans 9.1-5; Matthew 14.13-21

I see quite a lot of visitors here today, so in order for what follows to make any sense at all, you need to know that I am not only a priest at St Martin-in-the-Fields, but also a tax lawyer. However, what many of the regulars already know through bitter experience, is that I have a habit of always trying to pack just a little too much into any single day. So take last Friday. I started off at one of our offices in Hammersmith for a few hours, to talk to a newly arrived assistant, and then to draft a response to a government consultation that I'd committed to the day before. Then I came to the West End for lunch with a City Lawyer. Then I went to our office in Berkeley Square for some phone calls and a meeting. At 4.00 I headed over here for a tea to say goodbye to Nick one last time. After that I went to the CBI headquarters for a meeting, and then went back to Berkeley Square where I stayed till 7.30 for just a few more calls and quite a few e-mails. Then I came home and worked on my sermon. Now that may sound like a lot, but what you also need to know is that I left a team of people sitting at yet another office in the afternoon for a meeting that I'd forgotten to cancel, that I missed taking a lunchtime service here because I hadn't put it in my diary, and that in several of the e-mails that I sent out I couldn't find the language to stop them sounding plain grumpy.

A propos of all this, earlier in the week I was talking to a fairly experienced economist about the lousy quarterly growth rate numbers for the UK economy, and the lack of confidence in the business sector. He covered a whole range of factors, but when he'd done that he stopped for a moment, considered, and then said: "Of course, the real problem with the economy around this time of year is that everyone's just a bit knackered." Well, that didn't strike me as the profoundest of economic observations, but from a personal point of view it certainly rang true. Many of us – whether in an office, at school, at home, or here in church – have now been working fairly solidly for 6 or 7 months since Christmas, and it's beginning to show. I have been in numerous meetings over the past several weeks where tempers have frayed, problems seen where they probably don't exist, and insults taken where they weren't offered. We are, rather, going through the motions. In short what we really need is a rest, a holiday.

Now, for those of us with illusions of being indispensable, we can get by without rest, we can certainly cope, but we lose something – we lose a sense of perspective. We can carry on at work without rest, still performing brilliantly in many cases. But it's a bit like being brilliant on a high wire – everything, every scrap of concentration has to go into ensuring you stay on that wire. Family, outside interests, non-core work – and, yes, time with God – are sacrificed. Without rest we lose the capacity to really listen to people, to properly hear them. We lose the capacity to look people in the eye and establish personal contact with them when we talk to them. We lose the capacity to consider the impact of words on others before we say them. Underlying all of these, we lose the capacity to be imaginative and generous.

OK, so we really do need a holiday – I assume there's not much disagreement about that – but what exactly? Well, I don't think it should simply be the antithesis of work, the anti-work if you will, the only time that we can truly be ourselves. If we are to live single, integrated lives, not fragmented, compartmentalised ones, our holidays, our rest, should be part of the same cycle that involves both work and rest. 1500 years ago, when he wrote the rules for his new orders of monks. St Benedict

placed great emphasis on a day, a year, a life, that gave time for manual work, for prayer and for proper rest. Only then would all of our needs and capabilities be balanced out. So our holiday should not be the mirror image of a frenetic job or life. It should be something that allows us some space, that doesn't have too many deadlines, and that allows us to reconnect properly with those around us, with ourselves, and, yes, with God.

In today's gospel reading, the first thing we hear is that Jesus goes off to a deserted place. John the Baptist has just been beheaded and Jesus needs to clear his head, to pray, to refresh himself. But then, because the people follow him, and there is nothing else around there, we have the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand from five loaves and two fishes. This is so much the pattern of Jesus' life. He works, and then he rests to get back the energy that enables him to go back to his work again. So here, in this story, Jesus recharges his batteries, reconnects with God, and then goes on to make something very small and very ordinary into something very large and quite extraordinary. To draw this out slightly, the story of the loaves and the fishes – both the original miracle, and its application today – is about generosity and imagination. And it is rest and refreshment – the gift of the Spirit – that will give us back our generosity and imagination.

But what exactly do I mean by that? Well let me give a couple of examples. Perhaps at work there's a person you can't stand, who you spend your whole life avoiding. If you're rested and relaxed you may have the imagination to take a chance and talk to them, to find out some positive thing that makes them tick, some positive interest that motivates their life. You make that human connection, and all of a sudden your anger slips away. It is such a small thing to do – a few loaves and fishes – and yet the payback to you and them can be enormous. Or perhaps there's a seemingly intractable commercial problem. Rest can give you the generosity and imagination to work with others, rather than relying on yourself; to really listen to others, rather than assuming they have nothing to say; to empower people, rather than to micromanage. And all of a sudden the solution begins to emerge. A little cooperation, a little listening, a little trust, can begin to become a very big thing. And all of a sudden work seems a better place. Again, a few loaves and fishes can become something much more significant. We need to work, but we do also need to rest.

Well, for me the good news – and, perhaps, even better news for those who have to be around me – is that tomorrow morning (admittedly at 5 am) we set off in the car for France. I can already feel my spirits beginning to lift. My diary for September and October looks horrible but I hope – in fact I know – that with a break, a rest, some perspective, a time to reconnect with my family, and time to reconnect with God, that while those months may be difficult sometimes, they will also bring moments of generosity and imagination where those miracles of multiplication can occur.

Amen.