



## Ordinary Time

Sunday 2 June 2024

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*Exodus 20: 8–11    Luke 13: 10–17*

Do you find it hard to recall what happened during the pandemic? If so, you're not alone. Studies have shown how the experience of Covid lockdowns altered the perception of time for many people, perhaps unsurprisingly. There's also been an explosion in the study of such things since the pandemic. The removal of daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal landmarks has resulted in an eliding of events. Was it that first springtime that was so mild when I made a vegetable garden from scratch? When was it that my daughter was stuck in a fifth-floor apartment in Italy with no daily walk permitted and just the view of one solitary tree in the distance? When was it that my 16-year year-old spent a fortnight in quarantine on her own?

A couple of weeks ago over 100 Trinity men and women had their MA Graduation ceremony here in the Chapel rather than at the Senate house. Just beforehand I asked one young woman how she felt about the change, and she shrugged her shoulders, resigned. Sure, it would be fine to be in College, although she was a little sad about missing the walk along Trinity Street to the Senate House. However, for her this was par for the course. Every year of her time as a student had been disrupted in some way: studying at home, missing out of the usual activities and social life of university, no May Week, and so on. There had been none of the celebrations, excursions, rights-of-passage that one might have expected.

I don't know the stories of the young people here today: what they missed out on because of Covid, but I do know that the pandemic has disproportionately affected children and young people. And the temporal disruption of living without landmarks impacted people in different ways: the young were more affected than the old, the poor than the rich, those with existing health conditions more than those without. And the studies have shown increased rates of mental health problems and anxiety among students in particular during the pandemic - alongside the temporal disruption.

We might have thought that time without commitments, without boundaries, without the need to commute every day to an office an hour or more away would bring freedom, and for many it did. But I think that's because those people were able to structure their own time in a way that many others and certainly many young people couldn't. We need structure. To order our ordinary time.

'Ordinary Time' is also the name of the period of the Church's year between Pentecost and the start of Advent. We're in it now, although there's another shorter part in Wintertime.

The Sundays and weeks of Ordinary Time take up around half the year. In many churches you'd notice that vestments, altar frontals and pulpit falls are all green during this season. Green, some would say that's because this is a time for growth, when the central mysteries of the incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the coming of the Holy Spirit are assimilated into our lives. It is not ordinary in the sense of mundane, plain or unexciting. Ordinary comes from the Latin *ordinalis* meaning numbered or ruled. 'Ordered' we might say. And such order is crucial to developing freedom as a Christian or indeed as a human being.

In an essay on Vocation published in the 1990s Rowan Williams drew attention to Zeffirelli's film *Brother Son, Sister Moon*. Very much a product of its era (made in 1972) it tells the story of Saint Francis. In it the Pope asks Francis what his aims are. The Saint-to-be replies 'I want to be free like the birds'.

This is a travesty of Francis and of Christian freedom, says Williams. Freedom is not freedom to go wherever we want, do whatever we want, to remain uncommitted, not to have to make decisions and choices.

As Williams puts it: "adult commitment seems to have a lot to do with learning what you want to say, and being free to say it because you have the language in which to say it." Just as someone who learns to speak another language really well finds that their expertise opens up another world, the vast realm of a different culture with all the freedom that that brings, so learning the language of faith opens up a way for God to meet us. We step into God's culture and the freedom that brings.

In our first lesson we have an example of an ordering of time that brings God's freedom. The observance of the Sabbath, the fourth of the 10 Commandments given to Moses at Sinai, was unique in the ancient world. A day of rest celebrated weekly. Its origin in freedom from slavery is explicit in the beginning of Exodus chapter 20, where God identifies himself as the deliverer of the people of Israel who brought them "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". The God who in Genesis 1 was free to rest after the work of Creation could show the people how to use their **own** freedom.

This is also a lesson for us today, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says: "The fourth commandment is the most difficult and the most urgent of the commandments in our society because it defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity propelled society specialising in control and entertainment, bread and circuses... Along with anxiety and violence". Keeping the Sabbath in the ancient world was an act of resistance to the gods of surrounding cultures, and so it is for us today as we are called to resist the gods of our own ordinary, mundane time. Relentless productivity, never-enough consumerism, anxiety, worth derived from wealth or getting the 'right' internship or job. The fourth commandment makes it clear that **all** are worthy of rest, of freedom: this is for everyone – men and women, slaves and free, refugees or migrant workers residing in the land... Even animals.

In our second lesson we have more to learn about freedom, as we follow Jesus teaching on the Sabbath. In the synagogue he meets a faithful Jewish woman who has been disabled for 18 years. He heals her and she praises God in the place where that is so appropriate. But the leader of the synagogue has misunderstood the true nature of the sabbath. Whereas in Exodus, the focus of our passage is on the sabbath itself as completely central to the liberating action of God, here the synagogue leader's very human interest is in those six days of work that precede it. He almost seems to begrudge his fellows this day of rest. His is not a voice of freedom, and it's a minority voice too since all the people around, presumably all those others in the synagogue rejoice in the woman's restoration.

Not included in our reading are the two short parables that follow this exchange the parable of the mustard seed and of the leaven. In both the kingdom of God – God's promised future for all people - is of abundant, extravagant life.

The mustard seed grows into a tree so big that all the birds (the peoples of the earth perhaps) can shelter in it. In the next parable a woman hides the leaven, or yeast, in so much dough that she would produce a loaf large enough to feed a multitude.

At the end of this picture of how the ordering of time leads us into God's freedom I want to leave us with another picture. This one is on your service sheet. It's not particularly remarkable. It's a calendar from the 1549 book of Common Prayer, the predecessor of the book our service tonight comes from and from which we say morning prayer in the chapel each weekday. I could just as easily have taken a photograph of the calendar page from the book we use today. Just as in 1549, in 1662, and today, a table lays out the days of the month, from 1-28. You can see them in the 3<sup>rd</sup> column, in Roman numerals. The readings for each day are in the columns below the headings *matins* and *evensong*. You can see that there's an Old and a New Testament lesson for each of those Offices. On February 1<sup>st</sup> in 1549 Matins began with the first chapter of Exodus and the first chapter of the Gospel of St Mark. The introduction to my own book tells me that most of the Old Testament will be read in a year, and we'll get through the New Testament twice.

This practice of saying the daily office which all priests in the Church of England commit to on ordination connects all those who are praying at the same time: those who come to join in in Chapel and those far distant. It provides order in our ordinary days. It also forms a language of prayer in me which builds up and sinks down into my heart gradually over days, weeks, months and years. The readings might be well known or startlingly unfamiliar and the way in which they are juxtaposed with the events unfolding outside in the College, the town, the country and the world feeds into my prayer. One morning this past week, for example, the horror of the death of a child in a city under siege thousands of years ago brought to mind and prayer the terrible suffering of children in Gaza, whilst Jesus's tears shed for the dead Lazarus and calling of his friend out of the tomb opened a slim sliver of hope of restoration, of peace.

- The discipline of following the lectionary, a calendar, day in and day out can reveal so much about what the God of abundant love wants from us, his creatures.
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- The practice of the Sabbath in Jesus's hands is a language leading us into the freedom to choose life over death.
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- The ordering of our ordinary time is a key to open all this – if we choose to use it.

