

19 July 2009

‘Holidays for Christ’s People’

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Many people believe that the package holiday industry was founded by Thomas Cook, the Baptist cabinet-maker from Market Harborough. And, it is true that, on 5th July 1841 he hired a train to take about 500 passengers from Loughborough to Leicester to attend a temperance meeting and later laid the foundations for a prosperous travel business. But the idea of a holiday, especially a foreign one, remained a dream for most ordinary people. Two things made that dream come to fulfilment: one was the Holidays with Pay Act of 1938, which gave everyone the right to paid leave; and the other was the Second World War, which not introduced many servicemen to foreign lands but also left a legacy of aircraft just waiting to be used.

The time was clearly ripe for someone to promote a new kind of holiday and that man was a 27-year old emigré Russian journalist called Vladimir Raitz. In 1950 he hired a plane and flew a group of students and teachers from Gatwick to a beach camp in Corsica – the only place that the Airline Authority would allow. For their £32/10s his travellers were promised a week in ex-Army tents, “delicious meat-filled meals” twice a day (remember that rationing was still in force at the time), as much local wine as they could drink, and guaranteed sunshine. Since that tentative start, the foreign holiday industry has boomed, although today more people travel independently and take weekend breaks rather than one major holiday.

Now, I have to be honest: I somehow cannot visualise Jesus spending a couple of weeks on some Middle Eastern beach, paddling in the Mediterranean, going to sleep on a deckchair, and later indulging in a meal of fresh seafood washed down with a carafe of wine; although I just about could see him on a walking holiday, striding purposefully along some of the Palestinian byways with a staff in his hand and a haversack on his back. The only problem is that was the sort of thing he did most of the time, anyway! To be serious, we cannot imagine Jesus taking a holiday in the modern sense because they hadn’t been invented. Yet we can be sure that he did take time off from his busy and draining task of preaching, teaching and healing. As a human being, however divine, that was something he needed to do.

How can I be sure that Jesus took time out for himself? Well, we know there were times – as we read earlier – where he slipped away to have some time for spiritual and physical recuperation. For he faced the same problem as modern celebrities: it was hard to stay out of the limelight for very long, people tried frantically to seek him out, all too quickly he found himself being dragged back into the public realm. I think Jesus must have found this frustrating and draining – not that he ever seemed to show it in his words and actions. One can sympathise with peoples’ desperation but, in their need, they rarely considered Jesus’ own needs. No wonder he sometimes tried to sneak away as unobtrusively as he could, or that he spent time relaxing with Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Capernaum – not that relaxation was always easy with Martha constantly fussing and fretting!

So we can begin constructing a theology of holidays from Jesus’ own example. But I think there are other pointers to it in the Bible. We can think of the enforced breaks from labour brought about by the cycle of the agricultural year: I well remember our time in Africa, when there was little to do in the fields between harvest-time in December and the start of the rainy season in May. The Palestinian climate is different; yet work there would not be full-on all the time. To those times of rest we must add the great Jewish feasts, such as Passover, New Year, Tabernacles and Pentecost; although they were times of intense activity they were also times of fun when ordinary work took a back seat (at least for the men: I’m sure the women would have been busy cooking). And then, finally, we have the great ordinance, first mentioned in the creation story and then enshrined in the Law, of the Sabbath: one day in seven was to free from labour, a different day dedicated to worship and re-creation of the human spirit. God allowed his people time off – and they didn’t need to feel guilty about it!

Now that is very different to what happens in today's society, where more and more people seem to spend ever-increasing amounts of time and energy chasing their own tails. I recently read an article about a South African doctor called Frank Lipman who believes that far too many people in Western society are burned out by incessant activity and contract all sorts of aches, pains and illnesses because their bodies simply can't take it any longer. They have been pressurised by incessant deadlines and demands to succeed at work; they feel that they have to present an image of perfection in everything they do to everyone they meet; the consumer lifestyle has pushed them into a spiral of debt and overtime; they are eating too much of the wrong kind of food; the technology of 24/7 information means they can never relax; and artificial light has disturbed their biological clocks. Dr. Lipman believes that the total of all these stresses is intolerable; to use his language, those people are now "spent". The so-called "Protestant Work Ethic" seems to have gone crazy.

Well, I have a great deal of sympathy for what he says, especially when he says that such peoples' ills will only be cured by a radical change of lifestyle, not just a couple of weeks' break in the sun. But I wonder if he is only seeing part of the truth about modern life, or if his analysis only applies to some people. For we might also wonder if our society has become too holiday oriented. It is now commonplace to take a few days at a health spa or Centre Parcs, while weekends on the Continent are almost endemic since EasyJet and RyanAir have cut the cost of flying. There are many people who seem to live from one holiday or leisure activity to the next and regard work as simply an inconvenient way of providing the cash to pay for them. We might wonder if we have lost a healthy ethic and understanding of work itself.

Now, I don't want to make you feel guilty this morning! I remember, when I was a young Christian, that I had an enthusiastic friend who always talked about "redeeming the time" for God and making every moment count for his Kingdom. As a principle that is good: after all, we believe that we were created to do good works in God's name. But we also do need the time to recharge our batteries – for instance, those of you who are teachers will just have been desperately waiting for the end of term to come. (Those who are parents might have been hoping that it would never arrive, but that's a different story!) Nevertheless, I do want to challenge you just a little bit this morning as we think of our holidays and leisure time. The aim is not for us to feel covered in shame and guilt, but simply to help us think carefully through two issues.

First, I want to suggest that we need to think of the costs that are involved when we take a holiday – and I'm not thinking of the pounds that come streaming out of our bank balances! But there are issues such as the effects our travel may have on the environment: even so-called "Eco-holidays" in places like Africa or South America will have their cost in terms of fuel burned and carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere. There may also be issues such as the effects of tourism on the locality you are about to visit. Sometimes these may be wholly beneficial; but there may be effects that we hardly think of, such as rampant and unchecked development, problems with scarce water resources, prostitution and alcohol-related crime, the destruction of a fragile eco-system. Even the delicate environment Yorkshire Moors is worn down by people tramping the Pennine Way.

Second, there is the issue of our own Christian faith. Now, I am not suggesting that any of us – least of all myself – follow the example of the late minister Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and devote every morning of our holidays to reading the latest weighty theological tome. If I did that, Moira would soon be either hiding it from me or (more likely) throwing it at me! But what I am saying is that we mustn't leave God behind when we go away. For instance, I know it can be difficult to worship when we are on holiday – but I am surprised how many Christians never go to church at all during August because they see it as a holiday month. Even more seriously, I also know that holidays are a time to let your hair down (if you've got any, that is) – but that doesn't give us licence to do illegal and immoral things abroad that we would be ashamed of at home. Yet we know that does sometimes happen; perhaps we sometimes forget that holidays were once "holy days", not unholy ones.

I would just want to make one final point on this subject, and if it sounds like a bit of a moan, I'm sorry. But it's this: to what extent do we think of the effects our holidays may have on the church we are leaving

behind? For when we are away a lot, congregational life and fellowship are spoiled, we fail to hear the teaching that others are receiving, we lose the momentum of our pilgrimage together, and other people have to do the tasks which we have promised to undertake. Strangely, this is more of a problem in a church like ours, with many people who are retired, as they have the freedom to go away whenever and as often as they like (assuming they can afford it!) The parents of school-age children are pretty well tied to staying at home during term-times.

This point was brought out by two things I have heard people say. One came from the Vicar of a prosperous church in West London made up of high-earning professionals such as doctors and judges and (dare I mention it?) politicians. He said that congregational life was hard to sustain because so many of his members went off to their cottages in the country or in France every other weekend. The other comment was made by Nigel Wright of Spurgeon's College at last year's EBA Assembly. Those of you who were there will remember how he claimed that caravans had been invented by the devil because so many of the members of his former church went off in them for months at a time. Part of our Christian commitment and discipline may sometimes involve saying, "For the sake of Christ and his Church I won't go away this weekend; I'll use that time and money to benefit his Kingdom". Now there's a radical idea!

Well, after hearing all I've said this morning you may well have decided that my mind is so addled that I need a good break myself – and you're probably right! And I have no compunction about taking time off; I feel that God made us with the need for leisure and recreation, that you can make a good case for holidays from the Bible. It's just getting the balance right between work and play, between responsibility and the need for some time without any duties, between enjoying ourselves and serving others, between our commitment to God and our personal freedom. We do not have an inalienable right to holidays but it sometimes good for us to carve out some breathing space in what can be pressurised lives. For that's what Jesus did; and he never got the balance wrong!