

SUNDAY 21C
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

I wonder if you watched the Birmingham Commonwealth Games recently? I have to say as time has gone by I have become less and less interested in such games including the Olympics. I feel that there is just too many events, money and unfortunately doping. But if there was anything that made me switch on the television it is the 100m sprints. I used to sprint when I was younger and so have a particular love for that amazing race. We have obviously all heard of Usain Bolt, and his spectacular achievements at the current Olympics. But I wonder if you have ever heard of another 100m sprinter, his name was Eric Liddell.

Eric Liddell was an Olympic runner. Liddell, whose nickname was 'the flying Scotsman' (after the locomotive of the same name) was not a Scottish runner but also rugby union international player, and eventually a missionary. As well as being an outstanding sportsman, Liddell was also a devout Christian. This Christian faith famously came to the fore when during the Paris Olympics of 1924 he was faced with the prospect of having to run on a Sunday. He was seen as the favourite to win the gold medal for the 100m. However Liddell famously stuck to his own sense of personal conviction of the Sabbath and did not run in the qualifier for the 1924 Olympic Games in his preferred event of 100m, instead opting for the 400m, which would mean he would not have to run in what he saw as a holy day.

Most of us would know the outcome, Liddell, sticking to this conviction ran the 400m race at the Paris Olympics and

won the Gold Medal. Many in my generation would not know the story of Eric Liddell or experienced any form of Christian Sabbatarianism. For many of you however, Sundays in New Zealand were times when the family got together, shops were closed, and church was a priority.

All this points to the fact that the concept of Sabbath has always been an important one, so important that the Gospels mention many instances when Jesus comes in to conflict with the religious leaders over the understanding of the Sabbath. Our particular Gospel reading today has Jesus healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath. A woman who we are told had suffered for eighteen years. Jesus heals her by calling her over and saying 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' To which she stands up straight and is restored.

However with this healing act, Jesus comes in to direct conflict with the leader of the synagogue because he had cured on the Jewish religious day off called the Sabbath.

For the leader of the synagogue, such an action as healing would have been defined as work. And work was forbidden on the Sabbath. Now it is very easy to slam the religious leaders of Jesus' day and declare them harsh, unloving or cruel. But the reality is not so clear cut. The Jews and particularly the religious leaders sought to honour God with their lives and teachings. They however, also a bit like us at times, had become rather obsessed with reading the scriptures as a set of rules rather than a living document.

When are we also guilty of neglecting others and overlooking the fact that structures and rules are not in place

to rule over people, but rather to guide and encourage us to do what is right from our own sense of conviction? For Christian scholars have wrestled with the idea of Sabbath for centuries. At times opting for dismissing it completely, or in the case of Sabbatarianism in the Church of Scotland, over emphasise its importance, leading to judgment and over bearing legalism.

For we are told that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not for God. And it is here we find the key to a balanced image of the Sabbath. It is not so much about a specific day, or a specific rule, but rather about what it means to be human. We know that without rest, without times set aside for family, life just does not work. And so the Sabbath for the Jews was not so much about not working to focus on God, but rather a time to remind themselves of who they belonged to. They did not belong to one particular sporting team, one particular race, one particular culture, but rather to the God of all, which for them was the God of their ancestors. And so Jesus's healing on the Sabbath is declaring that this woman does not belong to Satan, nor to her ailment, but rather to God, that is what it means to have Sabbath, that is what it means to be human.

We are lucky in the Anglican tradition to have what has become known as a three-legged stool that holds up our theological interpretation. These are Scripture, Reason and Tradition. They are born out of the struggle of the reformation in England, which sought to find a 'middle way' between Protestantism and Catholicism. We must always hold these three aspects Scripture, Reason and Tradition in tension, using our reason to interpret the variety

of teachings found in the bible, and the tradition of the church to define our boundaries.

We, like Jesus, must look past the letter, and discern the spirit, the spirit that always puts human need first, and allows us to follow the one who is lord even of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ, who shows compassion over judgment, life over death, and love over hate. This a message that the world desperately needs as we come to terms with rising crime rates, violence, broken homes, racism and xenophobia. Jesus calls us to be people who remind themselves who they belong to. And as Christians we do that every Sunday as we gather for worship. For Worship is not a social club about how many friends we have, or what we have achieved, but about God. And as Anglicans we do this by gathering for Eucharist, bread and wine, so that we may be united with God, reminded that we are his and he is ours. This is truly the Sabbath.