

Dear Friends

I don't really like doing it, but I will have to do quite a lot over the coming months. The problem is I can't get out of it because it's about me. I know some people have formed the opposite opinion, but really I don't like talking about myself. However, there will be quite a lot of that over the coming months and I apologise for that now. I am much more comfortable about using myself as an example of something, a mistake made, or a lesson learnt, but then the focus really is about those listening (or reading when it's in the magazine) or on Father God.

In my "Life Plan" I was expecting to have another sabbatical about now. We are permitted to have these around every seven years and I last had one in the last quarter of 2011. So I think I was hoping that it might have happened early in 2019. The reason for this is that my "Life Plan" was for me to continue in ministry until I was 70 and in order for me to be in a position to sustain that it would have been essential to have that time away. Since taking my first sabbatical in 2004 I have come to understand how essential it is to build in a full break from the intensity of life in the vicarage. A priest is after all the only remaining professional who lives among the people he or she serves.

However, I really don't think that people understood why I was having a second sabbatical. I was greatly encouraged to have my first and people seemed quite impressed by the person that came back so recharged and enthusiastic. I know that reflected the teaching I had received and the blessings that had been poured upon me. However, the second sabbatical was different. Whereas my first was about the teachings I was given, the second one was about working out a new teaching I believed I was to give. Not only that, I know I wanted to measure the success by how it might change others. I recall the time I called our congregations together to share the fruit of my second sabbatical; we had quite a good turnout as I remember. However, the thrust of my sermon was not so much about me, but about how everyone else would respond.

The word sabbatical means to rest. In the Old Testament you were supposed to stop everything you were doing and simply rest. It is vital therefore for everyone to build into their lives their times of rest. Over time it has become very difficult to have one single day for everyone to have their rest. However as Jesus makes it clear it is not the day so much as the rest that is important: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2 vs 27), that is why my day off is a Friday.

A lot has been said about the work life balance and I have talked about it myself in times past. To get this we recognise these days that proper time off each week and regular holidays are important. Of course it is that time of year when we are busy planning our summer holidays, so we are aware of how important they are. I find that a week away is not enough, because once you begin to relax you have to prepare to get back again. However, I am grateful that I have six weeks each year to recharge my batteries and it is helpful to place these at intervals through the year so that there is always a bit of personal space on the horizon.

Sabbaticals are different though because they provide space for more than rest. Though the reality is that in every holiday and both sabbaticals I have always had work to do even if it is just reading a book. It is reading and further theological education that makes sabbaticals so important. In my first sabbatical I read 13 books and studied at three courses. In my second it was much more about learning in other ways and my hope was that a third would have been highly beneficial.

The problem is that last summer I recognised that three months away would not be enough. It was necessary for others to point it out, but I finally realised that there was very little left to revitalise and that a longer rest was needed. The wonderful thing was that at the same time I was aware of a new calling of Father God on my life. When that happened I began to realise that if I were to be obedient to this calling I could not remain as a fulltime priest. So, with the help of friends, Emma and I set about working out what this calling was and how we were to fulfil it. If the truth is known this calling has been growing in me for sometime but now it came fully into view. My growing sense of weariness helped me to understand that I was entering into an extended sabbatical facilitated by my retirement and then the Lord God would show us what he had prepared for us.

I still have no real idea of what this will be. There are ideas and thoughts about it. However, Father God has made it clear to us that our first priority is rest. However, we know that he has something for us to do and therefore requires our commitment and obedience. Throughout my ministry here I have made it my business to call all people to be obedient to the calling of God and if I were not prepared to be obedient myself it would make a mockery of all that.

However in all of this there is a lesson about rest for us all. Life is not about work, necessary as it is. Rest is not about idleness either, but being creative in a new way. The Psalmist tells us "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46 vs 10). It implies that when we rest we are in a position to hear God. King David also gives us a picture of the interplay of activity and rest "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters" (Psalm 23 vs 1&2). So it is important to take proper rest as we need it so we are ready for action also. So my prayer is that you will value your times of rest so as to be recharged for the demands of life. May you also learn to be obedient to the voice of Father God and may you learn to use your rest in a way that you can hear it.

May the Lord richly bless you.

Robert