

REFLECTION Sunday 15th August 2021

Leviticus 23. 1-8

I wanted to reflect this week on the subject of Holidays, vacations, annual leave, days off and so on, but the bible doesn't mention holidays very much. It does mention "Holy Days", but our modern holidays, or at least our understanding of what we think of as a holiday didn't exist.

Let me attempt to impress you then with some holiday facts, and I'll attempt to tie them - no matter how loosely, with the reading from Leviticus 23. It's not about holidays but it is a reading about holy days, which will have to be good enough for our purposes today.

Up as far as the Middle Ages there were no holidays in the modern sense. People travelled for work, for war or for religious reasons. People went on pilgrimages for religious reasons. However pilgrimages were not really holidays - or they were not meant to be! In the 14th century Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales about a group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. In England people went on pilgrimages to shrines in places like Winchester. Sometimes people went on pilgrimages abroad to places like Rome or Jerusalem.

However even for Medieval peasants life was not all hard work. People were allowed to rest on the Holy days (from which we get our word holiday), and this is where our reading from Leviticus comes in. "...on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation: you shall not work at your occupations." But this is more about religious observance than a jolly holiday.

This section of Leviticus that we read today, sets out the early festivals, or holy days, of the early Jewish church - these are in the laws handed down to Moses. While this morning's passage concerns The Sabbath and Passover, other festivals mentioned in chapter 23 include The Offering of First Fruits (that's harvest to you and I), The Festival of Weeks, The Festival of Trumpets (very noisy!), The Day of Atonement, and The Festival of Booths. These festivals or Holy days weren't meant to be fun, they were strict religious observances. Leviticus is the books of law, so there are equally strict instructions to go alongside the strict religious observances which had to be followed, and without question.

In Jesus' time these festivals were incredibly well established, and we often encounter Jesus in the bible at one or other of the festivals set out by Moses and recorded in Leviticus. But Christians and Jews didn't invent festivals or holy days - pagan faiths already had these, but they were more frivolous, less pious affairs, and more than likely a good deal more fun than what Leviticus offers.

But fun and holidays go together don't they? The packing, the arguments, the traffic, the crowds, the weather...

For our religious forbearers, The Puritan Protestants, there was entirely far too much fun being had at festivals. Famously the Puritans banned Christmas in 1647. They saw it as being too Catholic, or Popish, and because it was based around the Roman holiday of Saturnalia - which actively encouraged fun and misrule. The public responded violently to the ban, particularly in Canterbury where rioting and looting broke out. The repercussions led eventually to a rebellion and a second Civil War.

Until the late 19th century going away on holiday was only for the wealthy. For example in the late 17th century and in the 18th century it became common for wealthy young men to travel abroad on

a grand tour of Europe to finish their education. A grand tour would last years and would take in the most famous places in Europe.

Also the 18th century rich people visited spas. They believed that bathing in and/or drinking spa water could cure illness. A tourist industry grew up around these.

in 1871 the Bank Holiday Act gave workers a few paid holidays each year when they were first recognised in an Act of Parliament authored by Sir John Lubbock. He was a banker who, it is said, was so keen on cricket he chose dates when village matches were played in his home county.

Also in the 1870s some clerks and skilled workers began to have a week's paid annual holiday. However even at the end of the 19th century most people had no paid holidays except bank holidays. May Day - for example - only became an official bank holiday in 1971, associated strongly with International Workers' Rights day, which some think has marked it out as a political target even today. But, again, its roots as a holiday stretch back to pre-Christian pagan festivals, and the Gaelic Beltane. The familiar rituals of dancing around the Maypole and the crowning of the May Queen made it a popular seasonal celebration in medieval England.

In the late 19th century when some skilled workers began to have paid holidays they often went to stay at the seaside. As a result seaside towns like Blackpool, Bognor and Morecambe boomed. Here in Swindon we know that the railway works would shut down in the summer while the workforce went off on holiday en masse.

In 1939 a new law in Britain said that everyone must have one weeks annual paid holiday. By the 1950s two weeks were common and by the 1980s most people had at least 4 weeks annual holiday.

The first passenger jet service began in 1952. However in the early 20th century flight was a luxury few people could afford. Furthermore only a small minority could afford foreign travel. However as air travel became cheaper foreign holidays became possible for more and more people. Still foreign holidays only really became common in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s long distance holidays to other continents became common.

During the pandemic of course we seem to have gone in the opposite direction. Fewer of us have been able to travel abroad, many more of us have opted to stay in the UK for our holidays, perhaps that makes us appreciate what we have here even more.

Holidays have come a long way, but a break and a rest is important for us, to relax, recharge, and rethink. God of course never takes a holiday, but we must be thankful to God that we can take a break in our lives. Take time to claim your strength; this is a gift from God. Take time to have fun; it is God's way of teaching you your strengths. Take time to grow yourself; only you can grow you. Take time to trust yourself; God trusts you. Take time to be self-reliant; it is better than being dependent. Take time to share with others; they will bless you and you will bless them. Take time to have hope; you are a child of God.

Amen