

## **Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook**

### **17/18 July 2021**

#### **Welcome**

Welcome again everybody. Some year ago, an American Irish writer called Thomas Cahill wrote a short book called *The Gift of the Jews*, with the subtitle, *How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. When you think about, the Ten Commandments, the Bible, even Christianity itself – all these come from the ancient Israelites, the Jewish people.

#### **Topic**

Cahill picks out one gift which has travelled well beyond the limits of religious faith: the weekend.

#### **Steps**

(1) For us, the weekend is such a given that we do not always realise there was a time, a long time, when there was simply no differentiation of days and, as a consequence, no weekend. It was the Jewish people who invented the day of rest, the Sabbath. The word "Shabbat" means simply "rest". The Jewish greeting for Sabbath is Shabbat Shalom, the peace of the Sabbath be with you. The historical context is a key. The setting aside of a day of rest arose while the Jews were exiles in Babylon, the great, traumatic exile from 587-539 BC. They were deportees, enslaved, without power or status or hope. To keep alive the dream of freedom and to remind themselves that being slaves was not their whole identity, they invented the Sabbath, a religious day, devoted rest and prayer, when work was expressly forbidden. It is not clear how they got away with it; what is clear is that it became a huge part of their identity and remains so today. The third commandment says:

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

Behind this great gift is an image of God. As Walter Brueggemann say: Yahweh is a Sabbath-keeping God, which means that restfulness and not restlessness is at the centre of life.

(2) Perhaps we all need reminding from time to time, that our whole identity is not absorbed by work or career. For a healthy and long life, we all need a good balance of work and rest, refreshment, play, time with others. We all need time to be, time to be ourselves and time to be with others. It is no harm to ask yourself what brings you true refreshment and restoration. For me, the Camino de Santiago really worked: a simple goal each day to get to the next staging post; time alone on the way; time chatting with

friend and stranger; time together over food at the end of each day. No harm to ask what works for you and how to make it happen.

(3) For many people, this time of year means the opportunity for a break, time away, usually with family. A holiday is a sort of extended Sabbath, a time of rest and refreshment. Like the Jews keeping the Sabbath, it is a reminder that we are not defined by what we do; it is a time to be, a time to be yourself and a time to be with others. It can also be a time to let ourselves become aware more clearly of our need God in our lives. Our word holiday comes from holy day. It might be possible to factor in time alone during the break – out walking or entering an empty church, simply to rest a while in God.

### **Conclusion**

Thomas Cahill was right: a great gift of the Jewish tradition to the whole world has been the Sabbath, the weekend and the extended Sabbath of holidays. Ours is a Sabbath-keeping God, who invites us to rest in him. In the words of today's Gospel, "You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while."