

# **SQUEEZING GOD OUT OF SUNDAY**

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

**Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30**

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Sunday is a special day. Growing up for me meant it was the day I went to Sunday School and then youth group followed by evening worship. The shops were closed. Movie theatres took a break and Alan Walker would appear on TV with his fearless program, “I challenge the minister”.

Sunday was a day reserved for God. It was very much the domain of the churches. Indeed, the special nature of this day was reflected in double time pay rates to compensate employees who were unfortunate enough to have to work on this sacred day.

But no more. Sunday pay rates are being cut and, moreover, Sunday has become a day when, for example, weekend tabloids and television networks serve up a smorgasbord of testosterone-charged, non-stop action that is not about religion.

These days it is God who struggles to get a guernsey on Sundays. There is “Songs of Praise” and “Compass” but that’s about all. Religion and issues of faith hardly rate a mention. Even earlier this year when Easter Day fell on a Sunday, ABC religious programming ran a story about Easter eggs and the Easter bunny!

Meanwhile, shows like “Nine’s Wide World of Sport”, “Fox Sports”, the ABC’s “Offsiders”, “The Sunday Footy Show”, “The Sunday Roast” and the” NRL Match of the Day” dominate the airwaves.

Even the news falls into line as bulletins are headed up with Bernard Tomic’s meltdown at Wimbledon, Tom Bugg’s six match suspension for whacking a Sydney Swan on the Aussie Rules field, our cricketer’s pay dispute with the Australian Cricket Board and reports concerning a mass outbreak of grief hitting NSW as Queensland is poised to steal yet another State of Origin title.

The reality is that Sunday is no longer about God. Rather, it seems to be primarily about sport. It’s about those teams who run onto paddocks all around Australia to defend their parochial fantasies. It’s about those heroes who are locked into gladiatorial clashes to prove their worth.

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It's about those people who strive to win to ensure we all feel good, to affirm life is worth living and to insist we are actually better than that mob over there on the other side of the border or on the other side of the world.

As one enthusiast comments: *"this is not a secular concept, mate.....this is nirvana.....if God had intended we spend our Sundays in church, he wouldn't have given us rugby league, Aussie Rules, cricket or soccer. I'm sorry, if church attendances have fallen dramatically over the years. But it's time the church acknowledged what all of us lapsed church-goers already know: too much sport is never enough. Especially on Sundays.*

Now, it seems to me that sport is really not the only thing that is replacing God on Sundays. We need only visit those bastions of consumerism called shopping malls where retail therapy dominates the lives of many to realize this. Meanwhile the pressure of work these days means God is being squeezed out of Sundays to make room for grandparents, grandchildren or for couples to simply catch up with one another.

And here, I believe, the very things that are replacing God are becoming a kind of religion in themselves. As our sporting enthusiast says, *"this is not a secular concept, mate, this is nirvana!"* In other words, sport and other things take on the role and the function of religion.

I recall a longstanding friend of mine who recently announced he was no longer coming to church. Rather, his needs were now effectively fulfilled, his time was being better spent every Sunday morning at the gym.

You may wonder what's going on here. But this is another case where an activity (in this case physical fitness), begins to play the role of religion as my friend becomes part of a new community of like-minded, similarly motivated people, he encounters new friendships, develops new relationships, identifies new goals, experiences new forms of personal fulfilment and discovers new purposes in life.

Being part of a community, encountering friendships, building relationships, identifying goals, experiencing personal fulfilment and discovering purpose in life are all part of one's religious quest. Here needs are met. The quest for meaning is fulfilled. Life gains some sense of order and purpose. And for my friend these things are realised not in the church. They are realised in the gym. For others, it may be on the sporting field, in the shopping mall or around the family table.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus speaks into a context not unlike the one I refer to here. Jesus is addressing communities in his home province of Galilee. These people are comfortably settled into a pattern of worship and faith that embodies a religion that meets needs, provides meaning and offers a sense of order and purpose.

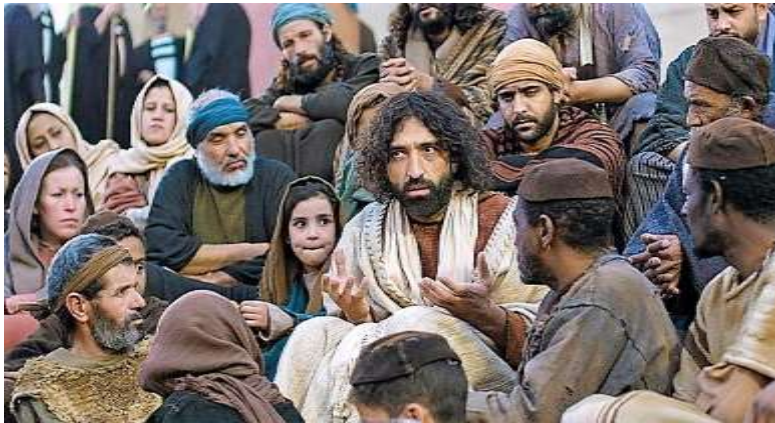
And while they pay homage to God, God is remote. While God is an important part of their ancestral heritage, God is dislocated from common life. While God is spoken about in name, God is removed from human interaction. God is effectively domesticated into someone who sanctions the status quo and who legitimises the human quest.

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This is brought out in Jesus' reference to children sitting in the market place calling out *"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn"* (Matthew 11:17).

In Jesus' time it was common for young boys to play vigorously during wedding festivals with the intention of creating a real sense of celebration and joy. Meanwhile girls would lead the wailing at funerals.

So, in other words, Jesus is claiming things were said and things were done. But the people did not respond. Jesus summoned the people to "dance" but they did not "dance". Jesus wailed in grief but the people did not "mourn". Instead, the people simply fell into their own form of self-satisfaction creating a religion that mirrored a tepid form of deism where God is effectively silenced, where God is simply pushed aside.



Friends, if we were to read on in this passage we will discover Jesus is quite harsh on these communities. Indeed, they fall under God's judgement because their relegation of God to the insignificant, their consignment of God to the impotent and irrelevant was deemed to be more serious than the actions those of other communities who claimed no knowledge and certainly no tradition of worshipping God.

Here, I believe there are two things to note.

Firstly, Jesus warns us about embracing a religion that domesticates God into someone who simply meets our needs, provides meaning and offers a sense of order and purpose in life. Jesus alerts us to a religion that squeezes God out or deems God irrelevant to the critical scheme of things.

For the heart of Christian faith not only meets our needs, the point of following Jesus not only provides meaning. The thing about being Christian does not simply offer us a sense of order and purpose. Rather, Christ demands things from us. Here Christ requires repentance. Christ calls on us to acknowledge our inadequacies as we affirm our ultimate dependency is focussed on the initiatives that come - not out of our own needs or desires - they come from God.

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Christian faith exhorts us to action as we take up one's cross to follow Jesus. Christian faith sets forth a vision that charges us to bear witness to the transformation, the renewal and the redemption of creation.

Hence, as harsh as these words may seem, my dear friend's flight to the gym is no proxy to an active faith in Christ. The passion of the sporting field is no surrogate to following Jesus. The frequenting of shopping malls is no alternative to being a disciple of our Lord. The prioritization of family life at the expense of an active engagement in the church, is no real substitute for what it means to be the Body of Christ.

Secondly, the words of Jesus in our text today cause us to look not only at those who choose to explore or express religious matters in a way that is beyond the church. They prompt us to look inwardly at the life and witness we embrace as church goes, as people who gather for worship every week.

And the question is this. When the flute is played do we actually "dance"? When the people wail do we seriously "mourn"? Or are our lives and our expressions of faith no different to people who go to the gym on Sundays? Is what we do and what stand for no different to those who engage in the habit of retail therapy or to those who realign church priorities to concentrate solely on the interests of the family circle?

I have a hunch some people move away from church because what we do here and what we affirm isn't all that different to working out in a gym, to attending a sporting function, to engaging in a shopping spree or to sharing in precious family time. Think about it!

Friends, Jesus calls us to much more than this. For you see, Christianity is meant to be a world-shattering, life-changing experience. Here the status-quo is of little consequence. Being comfortable, predictable and safe doesn't really rate. Being happy and content is not the full story.

To follow Christ and to be Christ's church is to, first and foremost, heed the call to repentance and to make a commitment to the kind of radical discipleship that seeks to change the world and to actively proclaim the unmerited, unconditional love of Jesus Christ to all people.



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The Gospel reading for today concludes with some amazing words from Jesus that say: *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

To be “yoked” is to work in harness with Christ, to live with him, to work with him and to be Christ to others. Here Jesus is simply saying that if you do this, if you chose to invite me into your life, if you come and join me, then the going will be “easy”.

It will be “easy” in the sense that this is what life is meant to be. It will be “easy” because this what the church is called into being to do. It will be “easy” because this is what we, as a congregation, are actually challenged to bear witness to!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever we do and whoever we are, our religious identities and our actions as a people of faith are to be defined by Jesus. Jesus’ call to abundant life is the focus. Jesus’ command to take up the cross is the pivot. Jesus’ bid to “dance” and to “mourn” is the heart of it all.

So, while God continues to be squeezed out of Sunday, let us ensure that we, in our lives as a people of God, honour our Lord on the Sabbath, participate actively in God’s church (the Body of Christ) and, most importantly, be the radical, proactive, passionate people Jesus calls us to be now and always!

Amen.

