

Stealing back time

There are never enough hours in the day! Where has the year gone?! Is it that time already? These are the common questions of a society out of time; a society like ours, in which we have so much we want to do, or as Bono puts it 'where freedom looks like too many choices'. The title of a well known book from some years ago called 'The Thieves of Time' suitably describes how many of us feel in our day-to-day lives. Well, whoever the thieves of time were, it's time we stole it back.

When I read through the gospels, one of the things I notice is that Jesus never saw anything as an interruption to what he was doing. Consider the instances where he is on his way somewhere, either to preach, heal, or minister in some other way, and he is stopped in his tracks by a person such as the woman who had a bleeding problem. In desperate faith she touches his cloak, knowing that she will be healed. Notice that Jesus doesn't turn around and say "look, I'm busy at the moment, can you come back in half an hour?". He is instead filled with compassion and stops everyone in their tracks. Knowing power has gone out of him, he asks who it was who touched him and out comes the healed woman, trembling with fear. He then tells the woman that her faith has saved her, and she is affirmed with full dignity right there in front of the pressing crowds.

It seems that, although he did so much that John's Gospel says that all the books in the world couldn't tell what he did, Jesus never felt rushed for time. He had his priorities right. He was driven by love. Our rush for time is often about us and our plans, what we want to do. When I want to spend time writing on the weekend but I have to mow the lawn or weed the garden or perform an errand for someone – that's when I can get resentful, and it's always because my plans and my expectations have not been fulfilled.

Every December we are reminded of how rushed our lives have become. The month before Christmas is not called the silly season for nothing. Why is it that we always decide to catch up with long lost friends in December? We always say we have to catch up before Christmas. Is it because we don't want to admit that if we don't catch up before Christmas that it is more than likely that we won't bother to find time in the new year? I suspect so.

One of the things I find helpful in starting my day is to have a time of quiet devotion in the morning, classically in Christian circles called the 'quiet time'. For me it takes the form of reading some Scripture and other inspirational material over breakfast, praying for God to fill me with his Holy Spirit and asking that I do his will for that day, that I will be Christlike and will give to others. Basically, that I will get out of myself. It works well...most of the time. Often I will feel rushed in the mornings, and as I'm reading or praying I'll have one eye on the clock and be thinking "I have to finish in 5 minutes". That is not being still before God. It is when nothing else matters but being still before God at that moment that I am ready to face the day in a proper way.

A few times recently I have thought again that there are just not enough hours in the day. Often too I will overreact when my wife tells me all that we have to get through on the weekend. That's when I can withdraw into a childish resentment because I'm not getting my way, and of course it's all her fault for wanting to disrupt my plans. However if I had discussed my plans with her in the first place, we could have reached a compromise.

What a contrast to the truth that a thousand years is as one day to the Lord, as one of Peter's letters tells us. In my opinion, this verse has been taken completely out of context over many years as it has been used to refer to the time when Jesus might come back or to how old the earth might be. I don't think it has anything to do with that at all. I think it is simply referring to the timelessness of God, a God who lives in eternity and not in limited space and time like us mortals.

It is still possible in the 21st century to live a relaxed and peaceful life. As I write this I think of Paul's letter to the Romans where he exhorts us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The pattern of this world in the 21st century is that we have to have it all and we have to have it now. Study after study has shown that this simply does not work. Never has and never will. In our desperate quest to fit more and more into our lives, to experience more and to have more, the 'more' that we are being left with is depression that is 10 times as high as it was at the end of the Second World War, and a restlessness that our lives are just too busy.

The example of Jesus has never been more relevant to our lives than it is today. Jesus of all people knew what it was like to be in great demand everywhere he went. How many times are we told in the Gospels that crowds pressed in on him from every side, that there were thousands of people following him? Yet not once did he come across as being rushed or stressed about all the things he had to do in the course of his day. How did he cope? Well, one answer is that he had it easy because he had the slight advantage of being God whereas we have to cope with being mere mortals. That of course is an easy, superficial and simply irrelevant answer. Jesus, while of course being God, was also human, just like us. He lived in 24-hour days. He ate, he slept and he went about his daily business. Jesus though was always of the mind that his father's will be done and not his own. And therein lies the answer for us. If I ask God each day that I do his will and his will only, come what may, then I don't need to stress. There is always time to do God's will. I have come to learn that peace lies in choosing to do the right thing in any given moment, and not the thing that will necessarily save the most time or the thing that I really feel like doing.

The freedom we have in the 21st century does indeed give us too many choices. But we don't have to be a slave to those choices. Let us not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, the renewing of our attitudes and the renewing of our sense of time. Time is something that our frantic culture has stolen from us. Let's steal it back.

by Nils von Kalm
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