

3. The Practice of Slowing. John Ortberg “Life”

Ps 46; Mk 1: 32-39

Introduction

One of my wife’s favourite sayings is “Are we having fun yet?” and two weeks ago Peter spoke on the Practice of Celebration. I wonder, “Are we having fun yet?” since Peter spoke? If you can’t remember the detail, it’s all on the website. But remember, we’re commanded to celebrate; Hoorah!

A recent school report said: ‘The tropical forests are safe when John enters the woodwork room, for his projects are small and his progress is slow’. This week we tackle the practice of slowing as we continue our journey of training in transformation. You’ll appreciate Peter’s sense of humour in getting me to preach on slowing down. My Naval career hardly helped and this past two years has been frenetic. But slowing’s absolutely vital. I don’t just mean switching off and vegging in front of the telly, it’s MUCH more than that. We’ll look at some theory first, then some practical applications.

Time and Hurry

Thomas Kelly was born in 1893 in America. He lived in what we may think of as idyllic days. Yet his country was at war internally and overseas and growing as a world power. He lived through the introduction of cars, aircraft, telephone networks and international travel. He lived through the Great War and the Depression. He saw the start of WW2. He wrote this about his society: “People nowadays take time far more seriously than eternity”. Yes, like us, he lived in times of great changes.

This rate of change still increases, and society encourages us to cram more and more into the time available, both at work and in leisure. “Hurry! Buy now – pay later!” How true. Ortberg calls this “hurry sickness”. Like the Red Queen and Alice, in our society it

seems you have to keep running hard just to stay in the same place. Yet in our hurry we've lost the eternal perspective.

Yes, hurry robs us. Even Carl Jung wrote "Hurry is not OF the devil, hurry IS the devil." Hurry makes us shallow and superficial. It often prevents us seeing what is truly important. It stops us examining our lives to see where we've cluttered them unnecessarily. Importantly, hurry and love are incompatible; love takes time which hurry and busyness deny us. Ortberg's really challenging phrase is: "We must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives."

I once visited a destroyer at sea and wanted a young engineer to show me what he knew. He hurried off, keen to show me his knowledge of, well, everything! I called him back and we stood still for ten minutes, just looking at, and talking about, the ship's structure and pipe-work immediately around us. I can see him rolling his eyes even now! But an hour later we'd only walked one passageway yet we'd learned an awful lot about our immediate vicinity, what was good, what was just OK and what needed attention. I'd set the pace, not the youngster, so just by slowing we could really look around us.

Jesus can be like that. He calls us to a slow journey. He sets the pace. If we want to know what he's saying to us we MUST travel at his pace, or even stop and stand still for a while with him. Our readings show something of this.

The Mark passage contains great contrasts. There's the unbelievable hubbub of the evening healing and exorcism meeting in Simon's front room. Can you imagine it, full of noise and urgency? Then, by contrast, Jesus is seen getting up early in the morning to pray in a solitary place.

Jesus' type of slowness involves making time to listen to God. Then his priorities become God's and he's able to say "no" to Simon's priority of returning to the town. Sometimes the practice of

slowing needs us to say “no”, which I find really hard! I don’t need to do EVERYTHING! After that Jesus goes on to spread the gospel throughout Galilee – at walking pace! It’s slow!

The second reading, Ps 46, is for those of us caught up in the hectic life-style. God’s command in verse 10 is to be still! Why? To know “that I am God”! Like celebration, stillness is a command we need to hear. When we know that God really is the God of the universe then we can relax. Our hurry helps persuade us of our self-importance. We think saving the world is our responsibility. We have to be like Superman or things would go drastically wrong without us. But when we realise it actually doesn’t all fall on our shoulders, that we are in partnership with God, then it’s perhaps less stressful. That realisation comes from being still with God and restoring our sense of perspective.

OK – so much for the theory. What about the practice? We’re all going to do something now. At the start of one of my retreats a wise nun said to me “You’re probably not here yet.” She was right. I’d been so busy I needed to slow down, catch up. I wonder where you’ve been today, if you’re “here yet”? That may seem an odd question, but just pause to recognise what thoughts have gone through your mind this morning, other than worship. Is it the Sunday dinner, the kids playing up, what you saw on TV, the bank balance, what the plans are for the afternoon? Now, just pause. Breathe in and out deeply. Feel the seat. Move your tongue around your mouth, feel your palate and teeth. Recognise you’re actually here.

If we’re to follow Jesus we’re to “ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives”. Like celebration, learning slowness is about setting our mind to it. It won’t “Just Happen” because we feel like it. But it’s possible. Remember, we’re “Not Trying, but Training”.

Slowing How do we start slowing? Ortberg has a couple of suggestions. To stay within the celebration theme he suggests trying them as a game. I've found it's more fun then and reduces the frustration when I forget to do them!

The first example concerns driving. Instead of getting frustrated trying to weave in and out of traffic lanes to get to your destination quicker, choose the slow lane. I've found this therapeutic. I've also caught myself still trying to find the fastest way through a jam! But when I remembered I was slowing, playing a game, it took the pressure off. I could even pray for those frustrated drivers around me! When we went to Snowdon on holiday this Easter we chose to avoid motorways, and it was lovely. We weren't frustrated by motorway hold-ups as we expected to be going slower on country roads. We'd even the unplanned joy of passing near one of Nicky-Sue's friend's homes, so called in for a cuppa!

Try the same in the supermarket. Do you, like me, look to see which is the shortest queue? It's not simple is it? Who's IN it, how much stuff have they got, does the check-out assistant look new or competent? So try deliberately joining the longest queue and use the time to think, perhaps to pray for those around you who are more hurried.

So, slowing. The next tip is another 'S', sensing.

Sensing. It involves recognising and using our senses more often, rather than taking them for granted. I mentioned my retreat earlier. What the nun suggested was to take off my shoes and socks and walk around their garden, feeling the grass, listening to the sounds and trying to identify where they came from. I was to touch and smell the flowers, the earth, to really look at everything around me. Then I was to eat meals slowly, to actually taste the food. That's why we did the that exercise earlier – it's practising slowness by concentrating on your immediate senses **WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING ELSE!** I can't do this for very long, but I can try to do it often. Do you see the difference? It's about training, and it works.

Solitude. The final tip is about solitude, another 'S'. I talked earlier about how hurry and busyness can make us feel self-important. Solitude is the antidote; it exposes us to God in a unique way. Our status comes from our relationship with God, not from our apparent importance (or not!) to others. Remember Jesus sought a solitary place, but we don't have to go into the desert! You can do this at home for short periods, or by going away for more extended times. But it really means solitude; no secular books, phones, internet or TV for the period of solitude. This can be done in various ways.

Try making a short daily time to review the day, to pray and to thank God for his mercy and love. It can be good to go away regularly for a day or two, or even longer. Use the slowing and sensing techniques to prepare to listen to God. Use scripture. Pray. Write down anything of consequence that comes to you. Above all don't be intimidated by the thought of solitude. We've all got to start somewhere; it once took me a week to slow down enough to get 30 seconds of real peace on the last day. But persevere; this whole Christian life's a training programme and we must keep encouraging each other in it even as we celebrate it!

So, to conclude. We must distinguish between hurry and what's of eternal value. God commands us to be still and Jesus shows us it's possible. We can use practices of slowing, sensing and solitude to "ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives". These things are vital to our relationship with God, and they are eminently do-able as part of our training programme! Try it! And next week Peter will be helping us to understand humility, in the practice of appropriate smallness. AMEN.