

## The Revd Lindsay Meader, Lent talk 29 Feb 2012

### *24/7 – Ordering the days of our lives*

#### **Introduction**

In the midst of Piccadilly Circus and of busy, demanding lives in the city, how do we find a sense of balance and rhythm in our lives? How do we connect and engage with the rhythm of the city and the created world around us? And most important of all, how do we connect and engage with God, whatever you perceive God to be, in the hustle and bustle and noise of our urban environment?

For many, the pace of life in any Western city, and particularly this capital city, is relentless. Ours is very much a 24/7 culture – at any time of day or night we can shop, pay our bills online, communicate with folk on the other side of the world – not just by phone but now face to face through computers. A huge array of entertainment is available to be streamed into our homes round the clock, and we can carry some of the most beautiful music ever composed and vast volumes of some of the best literature ever written in gizmos which fit in our pocket.

And yet, for many city dwellers, we seem to have less free time to enjoy such leisure than ever before. How do we order the hours in our days, and the days in our weeks and the weeks in our months in a way that promotes a sense of balance and well-being, rather than a sense of exhausting and relentless urgency that pervades all our being and doing? As much as we may long for an extra day in the week, we only have the seven.

I'll be considering these questions from a number of angles: Prayer, Sabbath, Time and Busy-ness, Kairos, Sounds, Space, Bodies and Jesus' time in the desert. That said, prayer will be a constant theme

throughout tonight's talk. Before we go on to consider these questions, I feel I should offer a disclaimer. I don't have the answers! The struggles I will be reflecting upon are those in which I share. But in thinking through these issues, I find myself returning time and time again to my experience – over ten years ago – of living in a theological college in Cambridge, when I was training for ordination. In terms of the issues we'll be thinking about tonight, my two years at Westcott House still holds for me something of a golden glow.

#### **Prayer**

For five terms I lived in a single study bedroom in a beautiful quad, able to look out of my window to the garden below and the other three sides of the college building and, in the block perpendicular to mine, the chapel. Every morning the chapel bell would ring to mark the beginning of the time for optional meditation, at the end of which it would ring again to call us all to Morning Prayer, followed for those who wished by a daily Eucharist. In the evenings the bell would ring again to call us to either Evening Prayer, or later on, to Compline (Night prayer).

Westcott was a place with few rules but many 'firm expectations', one of which was that everyone should attend Morning Prayer and either Evening Prayer or Compline. The timetable of lectures, classes and other activities was carefully constructed to encourage attendance in chapel. Despite the rigours of the academic classes, life seemed suddenly very spacious and I have fond memories of relaxed strolls to lectures, taking in the vibrant walls of ivy turning from green to red to orange and gold in my first term, and the of sense of time slowing

down and having space in which to revel and wonder that this was my life now – a life of prayer and study and new experiences in a city which was a destination for tourists from across the world, and yet still had the feel of a market town.

I became a bit of a chapel junkie! After the first couple of weeks of struggling through the morning meditation, needing to focus every ounce of concentration, energy and attention on not falling asleep, I had to concede what I have always known, that I'm just not a morning person – never have been, probably never will be! - so I gave up the pretence, and the later start time of Morning Prayer more than sufficed. Most folk went to Evening Prayer rather than Compline, and as dinner was served straight after, it was simply the norm to join with friends for both chapel and food. But for me, the main event was always Compline.

Only a handful of folk attended this beautiful short service, sung without any accompaniment, and the deal at the end was that the last person to leave extinguished the candles, switched off the lights and locked the door behind them. I soon realised that this was the time when I was awake and able to meditate, and at the end of the service, cocooned more often than not in a sense of peace from the plainsong prayers and psalms, I would simply stay put and almost every night would have this gorgeous, simple candlelit chapel all to myself. After 20 minutes or so (the length of the morning meditation), all the chapel bells across the city would chime ten o'clock and so having accomplished at night what was way beyond my reach in the morning, I could stop there, or as I did on some nights, stay put for a little while longer.

It was a very special time in my life, in terms of balance and prayer and if I'm honest, I've not found anything to match it since, as life outside of that carefully paced and planned timetable, life in what we call the real world,

has gotten in the way. I had similarly powerful, though short-lived experiences of many week-long stays in Taize, where on a hilltop in France, every day of the year, three times daily the bell rings and everyone stops whatever they are doing, and heads to the church to pray. And after the 8pm prayer, the church stays open, sometimes in the height of summer all through the night. Such periods in my life have very much an oasis feel. But I'm aware too, that in such times and places, much of the hard work – in terms of creating a structure which supported and encouraged balance - had already been done for me. The challenge, back in the desert outside of those oases, is to learn to do that for ourselves, to frame our living in such a way that we are able to enjoy balance and life in all its fullness.

Here in the real world, the city has been likened to a modern day desert. In ancient times, the desert was a place of risk and danger where demons roamed, whereas today many cities are considered hotbeds of crime and danger, and as we saw last summer (2011), unrest and violence can bubble under the surface. The wilderness is a largely featureless landscape, scorching by day and freezing at night, giving little sense of the seasons or the passing of time. In today's city, we are often surrounded by buildings of concrete and steel, we spend hours each day indoors with the temperature regulated by central heating or air-conditioning and all too often our awareness of the passing of the seasons is marked predominantly by the lengthening and shortening daylight, rather than by the obvious signs of transformation in the natural world from which we are at least one if not many steps removed.

We are in danger of becoming ever more distanced from the cycle of life in the natural world and the pull of the tides. A recent Sunday magazine featured a series of extraordinary photos highlighting the

dramatic differences in water height at British beaches at high and low tide – transformations which span not inches but up to an extraordinary 15 metres. This means twice a day vast expanses of sand and rock are alternatively submerged and laid bare. For us city dwellers, the closest equivalent to high and low tide is the morning and evening rush hours.

### **Sabbath**

But let's go right back to the beginning of Creation, to that wonderful story in Genesis, when God created the world in six days. On the seventh day, at the end of God's labours, God rested and declared that day sacred, holy. In the story, humans were created on the sixth day and so their first full day on earth would have been the Sabbath – a day of rest.

What is the Sabbath for us today? Does Piccadilly Circus look or feel any different on a Saturday or Sunday from any other day of the week? I suspect not: in our 24/7 culture there is no longer anything to mark the Sabbath as in any way different or holy and Eros still presides over a crossroads of activity, with as many folks going to and from work as tourists. And yet, we desperately need Sabbath time – time spent apart from the demands of our everyday lives, from our weekday and workday routines.

If our patterns of working and doing and living do not allow for a full 24 hour period – which traditionally ran from sunset to sunset - then we still need to ensure that we nonetheless have some Sabbath time in our week, some oases where we can stop, rest, reflect and simply be, or in the words of the Buddhist and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh: 'Don't just do something – sit there.'

### **Time and busy-ness**

We have a very problematic relationship with time. Just think of the words we use in

relation to our use of time: we manage it, save it, spend it or waste it; all of these significantly, are words we also use in relation to money. Perhaps more disturbing is when faced with some unexpected free or empty time, time in which we have nothing scheduled, we speak not of savouring or enjoying, but rather of killing it. Chronological time, or at least our precise measuring of it, is a relatively new invention. Electric lighting and technology have hugely increased the time we have available to us for activity and, the pinnacle of success in the modern city, productivity. Time is money. Time has become a commodity. Time should be used to produce or achieve things. Having nothing to show for our time is very much a sin of the modern age. Ours is a culture of busyness, urgency and deadlines in which multi-tasking is one of the badges of evolution and progress. In her wonderful book, *The Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects:

*"Someone just told me that in China, the polite answer to 'How are you' is ' I am very busy, thank you.' If you are very busy then you must be fine. If you have more to do than you can do, and the list never gets done but only longer, then you must be very fine, because not only in China but also right here at home, successful people are busy people. Effective people are busy people. Religious people are busy people. For millions and millions of people, busy-ness is the Way of Life."*<sup>1</sup>

David Ford, writing in *The Shape of Living*, shares Taylor's concern of this contemporary addiction:

*"In extreme cases it fills day after day with work, and the time for a break or holiday never comes. In the worst instances of all, the addict combines with others to create a climate or culture of urgency in which nobody can take time off with an easy conscience. This and other distortions of the relation of leisure to work are common in a society whose main criterion for its own health is economic success, and which encourages people*

to focus their identities through their jobs.”<sup>2</sup> Time is viewed as something purely linear, with the focus being on the future – on continual advancement. But of course, time is not nearly so straightforward. We are shaped much more by the past than the future, and often fail to live in the present. Experiences and events from the past can be every much as real and as present to us now, as are the emotions and feelings they evoke. Both the wounds of the past and fear of the future may thwart our ability to live in the moment, in the here and now.

**Kairos – another approach to time** But there is another kind of time, not *chronos*, chronological time, but *kairos*, God’s time. Kairos is not linear, but it is all-encompassing. Kairos moments are when we escape from the relentless ticking of the second and minute hands of our daily lives and enter into a different dimension, one in which we can feel wholly present and wholly alive. Just as a well spent weekend off can do as much good as a whole week off, so a few moments, or even one intense minute of kairos time can transform us in ways beyond our imagining. Kairos is about depth rather than length of experience. Kairos moments are those when we see the world – and ourselves and those around us – through God’s eyes, when we are alive to every detail. Kairos moments are sacred, shining moments. Kairos moments are those when we become lost in prayer and a sense of real presence. Sarah Ban Breathnach clearly sums up the differences between *chronos* and *kairos*:

*“Chronos is the world’s time. Kairos is transcendence, infinity, reverence, joy, passion, love, the Sacred . . . Kairos is Spirit’s time. We exist in chronos. We long for kairos. That’s our duality. Chronos requires speed so that it won’t be wasted. Kairos requires space so that it might be savored. We do in chronos. In kairos we’re allowed to be.”*<sup>3</sup> The novelist and writer Madeline L’Engle identifies the importance

of *kairos* in connecting with the creativity that lies within each of us:

*“In kairos, we are completely unselfconscious, and yet paradoxically far more real than we can ever be when we’re constantly checking our watches for chronological time. The saint in contemplation, lost to self in the mind of God is in kairos. The artist at work is in kairos. The child at play, totally thrown outside herself in the game, be it building a sand castle or making a daisy chain, is in kairos. In kairos we become what we are called to be as human beings, co-creators with God, touching on the wonder of creation.”*<sup>4</sup>

Kairos moments are in many ways divine gifts and often seem to come out of nowhere when least expected. However they can also be sought, and usually found, by those who make a practice of being open to the wonder and possibility of God breaking into *chronos*. We can do this by seeking to develop that creativity within, by looking at the world, really looking at the world and those around us with fresh eyes, by seeking that space within where we find safe harbour and shelter from the many thoughts and distractions that wrestle to occupy our every waking moment and our cluttered minds, by seeking to be present in each moment, or as many as we can muster. The best and only way to do this is to slow down.

In his quirky and helpful book, *Do Nothing to Change your Life*, Stephen Cottrell reflects upon the experience when he confused the departure time of a flight from Dublin airport and ended up with a five hour wait in the terminal and relates how, after the first hour of frustration, impatience and annoyance with himself, he began to perceive things differently: *“But then, imperceptibly, a calm came over me. The next four hours did not have to be a problem. They did not have to be a waste. Rather, they could be a gift. And as this thought settled in my mind I*

*found I was able to just sit down and be still, and find contentment without having to be busy. I could relax and just be. . . . Slowly a poem was born . . . Something was awoken within me when I was ostensibly doing nothing . . . Rooted to the spot I was able to travel back into myself: back into a part of me that had lain dormant for many years; crowded out with all the activity of work and busyness.*

He concludes: *“When I speak about what happens when we do nothing I am not in any way wanting to exalt laziness. Rather, I want to celebrate what happens when we dare to stop and reconnect with a hiddenness inside ourselves where rest and play issue forth all sorts of wild, unexpected and creative ways.”*<sup>5</sup> Another zen master and seriously under-rated philosopher, Pooh Bear, sums it up rather well: ‘It is a very grand thing to do nothing, and then rest afterwards.’

**Sound** During his time at Dublin airport, Cottrell was able to tune out the noise and activity all around him and find that quiet place of creativity and possibility deep within. Whereas the desert is often marked by silence, the city is a continually unfolding soundscape of different noises – traffic, machinery, building sites, sirens, roadworks, music, voices of many different languages and perhaps if you’re lucky birdsong, or at night the many revellers who spill out of the pubs and clubs at closing time, nightworkers coming home or travelling to their anti-social shifts, the wheels of suitcases being pulled along the pavement by those travelling to or from far off distant lands, more sirens, the hoot of an owl, the cry of a feral fox or the neighbours’ cats fighting. Many consider this building to offer an oasis of peace and given it has streets running on either side of it, it is relatively quiet, but it’s far from silent, as those of us who gather for silent prayer once a month soon discover. In the city, silence is a rare and precious thing. Let’s just pause for a moment to listen; to

really focus on all the different noises which surround us . . .

Those struggling with prayer can find noise especially distracting, but humans are surprisingly adaptable in learning to tune out many of the everyday sounds which compete for our attention. Most of us practice a form of selective deafness, choosing not to hear the humming of the fridge, the strange intermittent whooshing noises of the boiler or central heating, the noise of the planes on the flight path overhead or the continual hum of London traffic throughout the day and night. Other sounds may be far more intrusive. I have a particular loathing of the irritating and relentless boom-boom-boom bass that seems to leak out of the earphones so many folk wear on public transport. The density of accommodation in cities means that often one person’s ceiling is another person’s floor and the excited toddling of a young neighbour sounds like a herd of elephants stampeding above us. If we find it difficult when we’re going about our daily busyness, it can be even harder when we try to slow down and to find that space within, when we try to pray, to tune our ears to the still small voice of God. As Alessandro Pronzato recognises:

*“The crowded bus, the long queue, the railway platform, the traffic jam, the neighbours’ television sets, the heavy-footed people on the floor above you, the person who still keeps getting the wrong number on your phone. These are the real conditions of your desert. Do not allow yourself to be irritated. Do not try to escape. Do not postpone your prayer. Kneel down. Enter that disturbed solitude. Let your silence be spoilt by those sounds. It is the beginning of your desert.”*<sup>6</sup>

It is perhaps just as well that listening for God is an exercise which is centred more on our minds and spirits and souls than on our ears.

**Space** This brings me on to space. I've spoken about the wonderful chapel at Westcott, so conducive to prayer and meditation. Before moving to London I was the sole occupant of a four bedroom house and so had the luxury of being able to dedicate a whole room purely for the purpose of prayer. Not so here in the city, where it's all too easy for our homes, which tend to be smaller, to get as cluttered as our minds.

Finding space in the city can be more of a challenge but it also presents many opportunities. Think of the number of churches and places of worship here in London, encompassing a vast array of architecture, ambience and traditions. Or it may be that you find prayer easier outside – we may not have any mountains or beaches, but London is well served by parks, rivers and canals. We don't just need space for prayer, but for refreshing our souls, drinking in the fruits of others' creativity and the city is great place in which to feast on the fruits of art, music, theatre, dance, film, literature, architecture and engineering.

But most importantly, finding that sense of rhythm and balance in our lives is about locating and freeing up that space deep within, that sense of presence, that place not only of creativity but of centering and connectivity. That space within in which we can not only know ourselves to be in the presence of the Divine, but also find a sense of connectivity with all creation, with the people and all the life forms with which we share this planet, and a sense of being grounded in the earth. It is in that space within which we are quite literally rooted, nurtured and nourished.

### **Bodies**

I've spoken a lot about matters of mind, spirit and soul, but we must not forget that we are incarnational beings, made of flesh and blood, of sinew and bone and muscle.

Health is a key factor in achieving balance in our lives and in maintaining a sense of wellbeing.

Playing can be as important as praying. Many of the highlights of my life, those kairos moments when I've felt fully and intensely alive have been incarnational and sensual, submerged in the ocean swimming round in frantic circles to keep eye contact with a wild dolphin, being thrown up and down sitting at the stern of a boat in lively seas feeling the spray of the ocean and the sun on my skin, cradling a new baby, rolling down grassy slopes with my young Godsons. Equally vital though much calmer are those times of real relaxation, when aching muscles can stretch out and be still at the end of a physically demanding task or challenge, or simply basking in the heat of the sun, with light dancing on top of closed eyelids, listening to waves gently lapping the shoreline at the end of a long swim.

### **Jesus in the desert and beyond**

It is fair to suggest that many of Jesus' habits and practices came out of his time in the desert, which was a period of intense preparation for his public ministry. As Christians, followers of Christ, we are called to live counter-culturally; to resist the temptations of our day and age to value ourselves and our lives through the eyes of the world, and to continue to seek to see as God sees.

One of the most striking things about Jesus' ministry was his approach to prayer – it was the very cornerstone of his life. Time and time again in the Bible, we see Jesus withdrawing to pray – before and after big events, miracles, trials and challenges, Jesus takes himself off, either physically or within himself to stop, to pray, to rest, to be. Whether it's on the mountain top or sleeping in the front of the fishing boat, Jesus makes time and makes space in which to know and follow the will of God, and from which to

draw the strength that is needed for all that lies ahead. From all that we read in the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus' practice is focussed on quality of prayer, not quantity. In their book about the Lord's Prayer, New Zealand bishops John Bluck and Muru Walters examine some of the lessons we find in the only prayer Jesus himself taught, and what it can teach us about how to pray. *"Namely, keep it simple and short . . . The request list when it does come is exquisitely simple and short. Three items only. Go shopping with a list as short as this and the consumer culture would go broke overnight. Feed us. Forgive us. Protect us. It's the core of what a modern psychologist would name as the fundamentals of human health, written in this prayer two thousand years before Abraham*

*Maslow defined the hierarchy of fundamental human needs."*<sup>7</sup>

I said at the outset that it's not my intention to provide answers, but I do want to close with a suggestion. In considering your lives here in the urban desert, and where and how to find a sense of balance, in thinking how best you can order your days, a very simple but enlightening exercise which may prove very useful is an updated version of an ancient spiritual practice, the Examen. It's intended to be used at the end of each day, but I offer it as a starting point for the task in hand and for our discussions tonight. It comprises two simple questions - *What (today) has drawn me closer to God?* and *What (today) has taken me away from God?*

## 24/7 – Ordering the days of our lives

### Questions to aid discussion:

#### Prayer

- What times of the day or night do you find most conducive to prayer?
- Are there times in your life when prayer has come more easily or been particularly hard?

#### Sabbath

- When and where are the opportunities for Sabbath in your life?

#### Time and busyness

- What demands on your time do you find most frustrating or tiring? Why?
- Is 'rest before work' a sensible motto? How could you practice this?
- When was the last time you felt an awareness of the natural world and the seasons?

#### Kairos – another approach to time

- Can you think of the most recent kairos moment in your life? How long ago was it?
- How can you create more opportunities to experience kairos?

#### Sound

- Which sounds are the sounds that intrude on your life?
- Which sounds which enhance your life?

#### Space

- In the Celtic tradition, 'thin places' are those where the veil between earth and heaven is most sheer. Where are your thin places?

#### Bodies

- Do you give your body as much attention as your mind/soul?
- Have you ever 'denied your body' as part of a spiritual practice? Was this a positive or negative experience?
- Which is your dominant sense?

#### Jesus in the desert and beyond

- What has drawn you closer to God?
- What has taken you away from God?

### References

- 1 **The Altar in the World**, Barbara Brown Taylor, 2009, Canterbury Press
- 2 **The Shape of Living**, David Ford, 1997, Fount
- 3 **Simple Abundance**, Sarah Ban Breathnach, 1997, Bantam
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- 5 **Do Nothing to Change your Life**, Stephen Cottrell, 2007, Church House Publishing
- 6 **Meditations on the Sand**, Alessandro Pronzato, 1982, St Paul's
- 7 **The Lord's Prayer**, John Bluck and Muru Walters, 2010, Anglican Taonga.