

The Day is Yours Fifteen Years On

It is a joy for me to be here and to talk about a book that I wrote nearly fifteen years ago now. I have always tried to write with a view to longevity - just I have sought to do pastoral ministry with longevity - but even I have been pleasantly surprised to see a bit of a mini-revival of this book. I owe a great deal to our Dominican friend Timothy Radcliffe who said such encouraging things about my work in the last chapter of his book *Alive in God: a Christian Imagination*. I am sure there are much finer things written about the breviary than *The Day is Yours*. Timothy exaggerates greatly when he claims it is the best thing he has read on the matter. But even so, I am glad for the compliment and honoured that Timothy should ascribe such lovely words to his Baptist friend.

As with all my books, I write in order to survive. I know it's not the only way writers form, but for me this is the fundamental reason. I only write when I'm in crisis, but since I am in crisis a lot, as C.S. Lewis might put it, I write a lot. Indeed, I wonder that if I wasn't a pastor, and hadn't had to deal with so much stuff over the years, would I actually have anything to say? I doubt it. As Eugene Peterson said to his wife Jan, when she quizzed him why his departure from the pastorate for the world of the seminary hadn't led to more books: 'Because I am not angry anymore'. Indeed, my first book *The Gospel Driven Church*, which came out in 2004, was written, out of utter despair concerning what I and many other preachers/pastors regarded as the corroding effects of church growth formulas on the Christian community. It was the first in a series entitled Deep Church (something of an evangelical-catholic dialogue in fact), in which a number of us, mostly second-generation neo-Pentecostals - were trying to reappropriate something of the Great Tradition for contemporary Christians who seemed largely ignorant of it.

When I reflect back on that time, which for me was rich in ecumenical cross-fertilisation, it occurs to me now that *The Day is Yours* was attempting to do something similar to Deep Church, but at a more personal level: seeking to encourage people to jettison the freneticism of so much of our modern lives - church life included - and return to a more contemplative way of life. By contemplative I did not mean inactive. The dichotomy of the contemplative

over against the active is a false one in my opinion, both on a scriptural as well as an experiential level (and one that has engendered a great deal of useless guilt – especially among working mothers). By contemplative, I mean attentive – which anyone can become of course, be they a chief executive, a schoolteacher, or even a monk. Attentiveness is not the preserve of certain personality types, or vocations. Rather, it is the discipline of entering into a day, however busy we might be, and determining to live it prayerfully, gratefully and even joyfully.

As a matter of fact, I was not so much encouraging others towards a greater attentiveness to daily living but exhorting myself. Three years into leadership in a large town centre church, with all the busyness that comes with evangelical activism in the suburbs., I have to confess I was anything but attentive. Like the infamous Martha, I was distracted about many things, and barely able to settle to a regular mealtime with the family, let alone focus on my daily prayer times. If it hadn't been for the fact that I kept a very regular sabbath and really did discipline myself to detach completely from work, I reckon I was living what they call a 24/7 lifestyle. Indeed, what sabbath I enjoyed was probably more akin to what Eugene Peterson termed a 'bastard sabbath'; that is, a day off in order to recharge, instead of what the Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel describes, in his seminal book *Sabbath*, as an entrance into rest.

Whether I have ever experienced that kind of rest, I doubt. Maybe it awaits the eschaton. But writing the book at least made a step in the right direction. Again, it's not that I was advocating a contemplative life detached from reality. On the contrary. The same chapter in Luke's gospel that urges us to do 'the one thing needful' and sit at the feet of Jesus, is the same chapter that celebrates the good Samaritan getting down on his hands and knees, and then Jesus urging us at the end of the parable to 'go and do likewise.' As Fred Craddock puts it in his homilies on the Bethany episode, if we were to ask Jesus who of Mary or the Samaritan are we to be like, he would say 'Yes'. We are to inhabit both the contemplative and the justice strand of our Christian tradition. But in order for compassion to be truly compassion, and in order for us to resist the siren call of competition, which seems these days to be present in just about every aspect of modern living, then it seems to me that some recourse to contemplation, by which I mean attentiveness to what is present before me, is going to be critical

for the health and well-being of our communities – and critical of course for any programme of social justice, lest it get swept up in secular theories or even personal vengeance.

As the title of the book suggests, this project of attentiveness focused on the outrageously simple discipline of living one day well. I borrow the phrase ‘The Day is Yours’ from the Psalms of course, which have been companions on my spiritual journey for over two decades now. The antiphony in Psalm 74 of day and night, summer and winter, strikes me as just the kind of rhythm that we are trying to achieve here. And although I have never been a monk, I was trying, as my friend Dave Hansen rightly discerned in the foreword to the first edition, to live like a monk: trying to live by the liturgy of the hours rather than the tyranny of the clock. Indeed, the heart of the book is arranged around the three main monastic offices because this seemed to me, at the time, the best way to explore what it might mean to live *hopefully*: his mercies are new every morning; *contentedly*: which is what happens when we slay the noonday demon of restlessness; and then *graciously*: by virtue of ‘not letting the sun go down on our anger.’ This is not the only way to work this out, I admit. And since writing the book, there have been other writers, far more adept than I am, in highlighting what might be needed in this cultural moment. But what makes *The Day is Yours* innovative, I believe, if not a little idiosyncratic, is that it seeks to take seriously the biblical witness, from the very first chapter, all the way to the Psalms, and then on into the Sermon on the Mount, concerning the sacrament of a day. As outrageous as it sounds, if I can live this day well, and not fret about all those tomorrows, then I may have a chance, even in the fast lane, which in my case is the south-east of England, to live fruitfully and not frenetically.

Fifteen years on, I feel the importance of a quotidian spirituality more keenly than ever, even if I feel less hopeful that it is possible. And the reason I feel less hopeful is due to a number of reasons which, at the risk of descending into existential melancholy, I should like to adumbrate in the next section of this lecture: the first of which being perhaps the most overwhelming of all: namely, the social media revolution.

The Impact of Social Media

In 2007, when *The Day is Yours* was published, social media was still very much in its infancy, and given my own Luddite tendencies, I was gloriously ignorant of it. I was having enough trouble with emails, let alone things like Facebook which was launched in 2004. Who would have imagined the scale of the transformation that has come in its wake? If the neurological science is to be believed, what has transpired since then is not simply a technological revolution but a fundamental reordering of reality, affecting not only our ability to be present to one another for any decent length of time - but the very nature of our relationships. I shall return to the matter of virtual reality later. What I want to assert here is the simple hypothesis that if living attentively was becoming problematic in the early part of the new century, by the beginning of this third decade it is becoming well-nigh impossible. Social media, in all its various modes, and its plethora of platforms, is reshaping our daily intake to something like an information overload, and our attention span reduced to something like the proverbial gnat.

When I have raised this issue in spiritual retreats, or simply in my weekly sermons, it is often met with the charge of hypocrisy, which is fair enough. I admit, I am a beneficiary as well as a victim of technology. I could not have written this paper without some recourse to the ubiquitous google and the odd word search. Even so, notwithstanding the correlation of aging and a good rant, I still contend that the difference between the inventions of Alexander Bell and the creations of Mark Zuckerberg is not one of degree but of kind. With social media, virtual reality and goodness knows what next, we are witnessing nothing less than a redefinition of what it means to be human, with my attempts to live slowly and attentively in the physical present about as unlikely as the reintroduction of steam trains. When, at a recent youth camp that I visited, the attendees were invited to hand in their devices for the duration of the week, one may as well have asked them to chop off a limb. They were terrified. Even walking these days, which is surely one of the last outposts of a long wandering spirituality, is subject to how many paces I can do in a day.

The Suspicion of Ritual

Another cultural factor that has proved unhelpful if not detrimental to the project I set out fifteen years ago of living more slowly is the enduring antipathy, particularly in my ecclesiastical neck of the woods, to the notion of ritual. A slow spirituality simply cannot thrive without it. It requires a prayerful as well as practical liturgy - in other words, a distinctive shape and rhythm - that subverts the liturgy of busy lives where even leisure can be anything but leisurely. As Peterson urges, we need to live by a series of rituals rather than schedules. We need to see the day as a movement of light more than a matter of tasks, each movement having its own gift. But if we persist and insist on regarding ritual as an enemy of freedom, then this kind of ecstasy can never really develop. Indeed, my perception is that this antipathy has only widened over the last fifteen years.

People tell me it's the word ritual that is the problem, not the concept, but I am not convinced. The way they talk about it betrays the fact that genuine spirituality is still regarded, at least in my tradition, as synonymous with spontaneity, and that liturgy is, by definition, suppressive of creativity. As I have discovered, on more than one occasion, the appeal to the notion of ritual only serves to arouse anti-institutional sentiment. No matter that so much of our celebration of life is shaped around gesture and ritual; no matter that everyone, literally everyone, lives by a liturgy; in matters of spirituality, at least in the circles I move in, ritual is regarded as the enemy of freedom, the nemesis of genius, and the sooner we dispense with it, so it is argued, the more vital our experience will become. My own view is that until we overcome this terrible prejudice, I cannot see how a truly slow spirituality will properly develop, at least amongst us evangelicals. Slowness requires discipline.

The Disparagement of Place

At the risk of being overly negative, another trend of contemporary culture I should like highlight as inimical to the slow spirituality I was imagining all those years ago is the ever-increasing trend towards mobility over against stability. In the terminology of David Goodheart, it represents the triumph of everywhere

over somewhere. I highlight this particular trend because *The Day is Yours* was as much a treatise on the importance of place and people, as it was on time: a celebration of spiritual geography over against gnostic abstraction. But again, in the intervening period, the erosion of commitment to anything long-term is making this more and more problematic. If there is anything that characterises life in the west in this third decade of the twenty first century it is restlessness, rooted in what the monastics identified as acedia – boredom.

I am hesitant to use the term millennials at this juncture in the lecture because I believe the problem to be ubiquitous. Boredom, as French historian Jacques Barzun identified, came in with the enlightenment; and if anyone is guilty of spiritual restlessness it is my own boomer generation. Even so, there is good evidence to suggest that millennials have taken this restlessness to a new level. Fuelled by a media that promises the world to the one who keeps questing, and raised with a mindset that life owes me something – more prosaically referred to as entitlement - we are witnessing in our day nothing less than a re-conception of terms that hitherto have been regarded as foundational to a stable and structured life. Commitment in this new world is no longer fixity to a person or place no matter how arduous or routine, but fixity for as long as it works for my advantage. Gone is the notion of covenant to a community or a calling – something that must be central to any spiritual geography that is worthy of the description Christian. Instead, we have developed contractual understandings of life that however reasonable they sound, and however practical they appear, are in fact simulations, if not parodies, of the real thing.

Speaking as a pastor, the ramifications of such a paradigm shift are truly immense: short term commitments, broken relationships, existential narcissism, doesn't even begin to describe the pathology that is now at large in our communities, all driven, to use a phrase from the book, by 'ifs and whens': by which I refer to the seductive fantasy of thinking that 'if only' I can get that new job, for example, or 'when' I move into that new house, to take another example, then I will be truly happy. Advertisers play upon this fantasy all the time. But the images are so compelling that it will take, in my opinion, an utterly radical detoxification if any freedom is to be gained. Visionary dreaming, as Bonhoeffer warned in *Life Together*, is not something to be tinkered with. It

requires something akin to an exorcism, otherwise it will destroy our communities.

Hopeful Signs

As I warned earlier, this paper was always going to skirt close to the borderlands of melancholy, if not nostalgia. Asking anyone to write fifteen years on, about anything, let alone societal change, is a dangerous request. If some of my reviewers regarded *The Day is Yours* as something of a pastiche fifteen years ago, an indulgent polemic, as John Drane described the opening chapter, then I can't imagine what they would think about my analysis here. Contrary to what they might think, I am actually a very hopeful person. Whatever else thirty years of pastoral ministry has taught me, it is the awareness that no matter how inauspicious the spiritual landscape is, and however regretful we might feel about the era we have been assigned, there is always much to give thanks for. And in any case, spiritual renewal was never going to be big, not as I understand it. Church history, as well as scripture of course, attests to the unlikely role of remnants as the catalysts of transformation.

Where this plays out for people like myself, who have made their vocation in the church as opposed to the academy, is in the multitude of small, daily interactions in the parish. Here in the everydayness of ordinary life, and especially in those moments of *extremis* that pastors and priests have the privilege of being involved with, the instinct for discovering daily grace has, in my experience, never been stronger. Notwithstanding the cultural pressures that are pulling people away from the kind of slow spirituality that I envisaged all those years ago, the truth is, there is nothing like the actualities of everyday life to override all of that and cause us to dig deep into a life of faith. Here, the discipline of living one day becomes not so much a matter of spirituality but oftentimes simply a matter of survival.

This, after all, was where my reflections began all those years ago. The story of Katie Devane, who taught me how to live in the present, even as she was dying of cancer, or maybe I should say *because* she was dying of cancer, continues to be the leitmotif of a slow spirituality, in much the same way as the Psalmist

observes in the relationship between mortality and wisdom – teach us to number our days, that we gain a heart of wisdom.

Living a day well, in this respect, is not something we go seeking after, as a spiritual nicety, less so a module in a course on spirituality, but something that comes to us as a matter of pastoral urgency. As I said in the opening salvo of the book, if sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, to quote the KJV, then sufficient unto the day is God's grace. And what pastoral ministry does is work at the intersection of these two realities – seeking to help people realise for themselves, each new morning, the mercies of God. This is not to say that everything can be resolved by the simple wisdom of taking one day at a time. That would be naïve in the extreme. But it is to say that one day contracts, as I like to describe them, are the bedrock of pastoral and congregational life. Learning to receive a day hopefully, gratefully, not to mention courageously, and learning to do this over the long haul, is the very heart of life in the parish, and central to any spirituality worthy of the name Christian.

Indeed, I propose that it ought to be one of the main projects the Christian community engages in over this next period. For sure, the cultivation of a quotidian rhythm may not be as exciting as visions of revival, which continue to lure evangelicals and charismatics, but the reason I continue to promote it is because it provides the kind of resilience that is needed at this moment in our cultural history. If revivalism is something of a last hurrah of a lost Christendom, I believe that the cultivation of *daily* discipleship in all the exigencies of real life, which is St Luke's take on what it means to carry the cross, represents the future. Epochal change, such as we are witnessing in our times, not to mention economic downturn, is not something that can be addressed by reclamations of a glorious past, or by denial of our cultural exile. We have the book of Jeremiah to warn us against that. Rather, we are called to 'build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.' Ours is not the project of re-building Christendom, or even a lost Albion, but the simple prayer of 'give us today our daily bread.' As I was trying to say in *The Day is Yours* and am inclined to say more strongly than ever: we are called to a 'long obedience in the same direction.'

One notes, in this respect, the emergence over the last fifteen years of all kinds of fresh expressions of Christian community – what Bonhoeffer termed the new monasticism. Within these often-homespun communities, it is possible to observe some of the values that underpinned *The Day is Yours*, not least the commitment to a far more ascetical understanding of Christian faith. I may question their appropriation of some of that tradition. Alan Jacobs is right, I believe, to discern a kind of bricolage of spiritualities that form in these new communities, which falls short of the kind of rigour that comes with classical monasticism. New monasticism feels very eclectic, and sometimes a little disingenuous. But it is certainly a step in the right direction.

Whether the congregation itself - which is the other main strand of Christian community – has the capacity to foster a similar asceticism is another matter. It's one thing to observe epic faith in the lives of ordinary parishioners. Pastors have been doing that for centuries, and it is what keeps them engaged. But does the congregation itself have the capacity to develop a spiritual rhythm that will sustain Christian faith through the challenges of what many regard as exilic conditions? For sure, it has the ability to develop programmes. But that is not quite the same thing. Indeed, programmatic formulas are part of the problem. They are responsible for what one might describe as congregational exhaustion. Rather, I am referring here to an ascetical spirituality that is prescribed by scripture, rooted in liturgy and empowered by the charismatic – something akin to what we imagined all these years ago in *Deep Church*. And pivotal to it, I would like to propose, is the retrieval of the Lord's Day as the culmination of life in the parish.

The Recovery of Rhythm

You might recall, one of the central convictions of *The Day is Yours* (such that a whole chapter is devoted to it), is that a slow spirituality must of course include Lord's Day worship as part of its rhythm, if not its actual heartbeat. The distinction I make between Lord's Day worship and sabbath was noted in the foreword by Dave Hansen, and is one I personally uphold to this day. But whether we distinguish them or conflate them, the point I was wanting to make

back then was how seriously the earliest Christians regarded Sunday, and how lightly, by comparison, we postmodern Christians regard it.

Fifteen years in pastoral leadership had already alerted me to the growing secularisation of the Christian community I was serving, manifesting among many other things in the highly erratic nature of church going. The reasons given by members of the congregation for their absence on a Sunday were not immoral. How could kiddies sport, weekend leisure, visiting relatives, be regarded as immoral? And yet in some subtle way that is exactly what it was. To frame it in Walter Brueggemann's terms, it represented nothing less than the substitution of the triduum by Le weekend, and in that sense had a feel of idolatry about it. Sunday was no longer the pivot of the Christian rhythm but something you could take or leave.

I would like to report that things have improved in the intervening fifteen years in my part of the vineyard. I would like to say that as a result of protests like my own, the trend has reversed. But that is simply not the case. If anything, things have become worse. The idea that you can have Jesus without the encumbrance of gathering with the faithful Sunday by Sunday is now so deeply held, it has almost become a virtue. And if there was any rear-guard fight, the experience of Covid has ensured that it was short lived. Like many things, Covid has accelerated what was already happening on the ground, with the added dimension that wasn't present beforehand - certainly not to any large extent - which is the option of live-streaming the faith.

I have been hesitant to introduce Covid into this essay, not simply because the subject is so enormous but also because in many ways the jury is still out on the ramifications of Covid in the long term. The historian Peter Hennessy is right, I believe, to register an epochal change - a world pre and post Covid. But what that looks like, how paradigmatic the changes are, and whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, is not entirely clear.

Take the matter of work life balance which is in effect what *The Day is Yours* is trying to address, and which possibly does lend itself to some preliminary scrutiny. At one level, Covid has been quite liberating. The replacement of the

daily commute by working from home, or some sort of hybrid arrangement, is generally considered a good thing, not least environmentally. Indeed, during the early months of lockdown in the spring of 2020, the language of sabbath was being used a great deal, certainly here in the busy south-east of England, to describe the new-found freedom that came in the wake of office closures. Clearly, for those in the health service, care homes, or even for professions like mine, it was a very different story. Likewise for people living in the cities, unable to access open space. Lockdown was not so much a sabbath rest but a stressful experience - over a long period of time. But even so, the legacy of Covid has been a change in work life balance, with more emphasis on viability and sustainability. Generally, this is regarded as a good thing.

As with all these things, however, there is an undoubted trade-off. The convenience of working from home, of remote workstations, is one thing, but who can measure the loss of social interaction? Bowling alone was a phenomenon that Americans were noticing almost two decades ago; but one could argue that social isolation post-Covid has become a kind of pathology. As regards religious gatherings, which is where we started this section, the experience of the pandemic has only served to exacerbate the problem, as well as raise other concerns, of course, such as the interference of the state in religious life. If the practice of 'going to church' – to use a phrase of Anglo-Catholic writer Martin Thornton - was already outmoded before the pandemic, then post-covid, at least in the West, it is practically antique, a relic from a bygone era, with little sign of it re-emerging.

Some of our more radical critics might argue that the relativisation of Sunday worship is, in fact, a good thing – the final nail in the coffin of a lost Christendom, and the precursor, therefore, of a more engaging faith. The closing of churches during the pandemic, it is argued, has allowed for a greater emphasis on the social embodiment of the faith, be it food banks, street pastors, and various other community initiatives. If my own church is anything to go by, the onset of the four horses of the apocalypse, which seems to me an apt description of our cultural moment, has not engendered fantastical prophecies among the congregation, but rather a quite stunning commitment to societal engagement. Furthermore, it has encouraged all kinds of technical

innovations, which has facilitated a far wider reach than has been the case. In short, the church is back in the marketplace, in ways that hitherto we only dreamed of, and to some degree nimbler than it has ever been.

But the gains, in my opinion, have been at the expense of something that is axiomatic to slow spirituality, and central, as I understand it, to Christian discipleship: namely, a six-day one day rhythm of prayer, psalms, and Lord's Day worship. For sure, there are times when this kind of rhythm can degenerate into nominality. When that happens, we need prophetic voices to stir us out of our complacency. 'Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen,' says the prophet Isaiah: 'to loose the chains of injustice?' It surely must be. But to do this as a substitute for gathered worship, and to the detriment of the sacraments, is not only a misreading of the prophetic voice, but the first step on the road to theological liberalism. As we began this paper, the call to social justice must be rooted in a concomitant call to spiritual renewal, otherwise the church will end up as nothing more than a glorified NGO.

Conclusion

As I come to the end of this lecture, I am conscious there is just so much more I could reflect on: how praying the Psalms every month *in seriatim* as they say, has truly deepened my awareness, as I write in the book, of the body of Christ, even as it has expanded my emotional range; how the morning has become even more important to me this past fifteen years as a sacrament of grace; how sleep, as well as sabbath, continues to evade me as the gift it promises to be; how the prayer for daily bread has become much more of a justice issue for the church that I serve, but also how it has reimagined its church architecture to reflect some of the more contemplative, dare I say aesthetic instincts of this book. Indeed, it is with theological aesthetics in mind that I finish this paper with a renewed call to live a slow spirituality. As the title of the book announces, I remain convinced that so much of Christian discipleship, if not civilisation itself, rests on the outrageous simplicity of living a day well. Yes, we have plans to make, and futures that beckon, but more telling than any of this is whether we have the courage to relinquish anxiety about those things and enter gratefully as well as joyfully into the day that we have been given. Which is not

to say that I cease to be purposeful but is to say that I refuse to be hurried. In the words of the late Dallas Willard, now made famous by the popular writer John Mark Comer, I ruthlessly eliminate all hurriedness from my life and seek instead to live by the unforced rhythms of grace. In catholic parlance, I enter the sacrament of the present moment. I refuse to be busy; instead, I live full.

As we come to the end of this day, may I thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts, and may I cite, in closing, the words of the Psalmist one more time: The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.

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