

## The three mile an hour God: slowing down

I'd like to begin with a very famous riddle that the creature Gollum sets for Bilbo in the book *The Hobbit*. See if you can answer this riddle for me:

This thing all things devours;  
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;  
Gnaws iron, bites steel;  
Grinds hard stones to meal;  
Slays king, ruins town,  
And beats mountain down.

Can you work out the answer to the riddle? That's right the answer is Time. Time, the one commodity that we seem to always be running out of, that at some points seems to fly by and others to pass so slowly. Time is something that humanity has always been obsessed by: how to measure it, how to prolong our time, how to save time. Today I'm going to look at one of the many different approaches Christians can take to time, one that stands in direct contrast to how time is perceived in our culture. And through this, we'll consider how it relates to the words of St Paul we heard in our first reading: that we should not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

It seems nowadays that whatever we are doing, whether it's watching tv, doom scrolling on our phones, travelling on the bus or train, or going out shopping, we're bombarded by the same message. It's good to go faster, be efficient, save time. We can buy a new phone that's 20% faster than the old one or get our food delivered to our door in only 20 minutes. And with Artificial Intelligence we can write a poem or a sermon in a minute (though I promise I didn't use AI for this one!). Or you can create an image with AI software like this one. It recently won a fine arts competition in the US, which raises lots of other questions about AI vs human creativity.

And yet, we don't seem less busy than we were before. There always seems to be some new pressure on our lives, to make us busier than ever. The world itself seems tired, suffering from perpetual motion sickness. We seem to be moving at an ever increasing rate. And busyness itself can become a badge of honour for people: that it gives value to our lives. It seems that at times we are constantly running to stand still. As Benjamin Aldous says in his book *The God who walks slowly*; 'We are caught in a toxic relationship with time, hurrying to do more and more, in a violence against the timefullness that we are created for and called to inhabit.' At this point in history, we seem on one hand to be running out of time to solve our biggest issues like climate change and on the other hand to be rushing forward into a brave new world of AI in the pursuit of efficiency to save us time. What does our Christian faith say to this world that seems to be rushing so incessantly ahead with time and how can we be transformed by the renewing of our minds?

Our curate Gary gave many memorable sermons, but the one I remember best is when he posed the question: 'What is the speed of love?' If you remember, Gary gave the answer that the speed of love is three miles an hour. To demonstrate this answer, he asked someone to come and stand next to him, so if I can call on you Jonny for this occasion... So why three miles an hour? That is the speed in which Jesus walked beside his disciples, teaching them about the kingdom of God, about love and joy and salvation.

Gary's analogy came from a Japanese theologian called Kosuke Koyama and I was fascinated to discover that he had written a book called *The three mile an hour God*. It's actually a bit of a misleading title, as only the first six pages of the book are an article with this title. However, I think he puts his argument very beautifully. He writes: 'God walks "slowly" because he is love. Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is "slow", yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, where we are currently hit by storm or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore it is the speed the love of God walks.'

Jesus himself spent much of his life walking from town to town and made time for many life-changing conversations with the people he met. You can probably bring to mind many of these. On one journey to heal Jairus's daughter he stopped amongst the busy crowd to recognise the faith of a sick woman who had reached out to touch him and be healed. Or there was the time when the risen Jesus walked alongside the two disciples on the seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, explaining the scriptures and renewing their hearts and minds.

There are points in our lives when we come face to face with different approaches to the importance of time. The only time I have ever preached to a large crowd of people was in a visit to Mberere, a rural diocese in Kenya. We'd been visiting the Bishop for Easter and he'd invited me to preach at a local church on Easter Sunday. Almost two thousand gathered for the occasion. There I used Gary's illustration of the God who walks alongside you, to talk about God journeying with us, the three mile an hour God. But it was the congregation who had more to teach me about God's timing. I asked the bishop when the service started and he was fairly unclear about this, but it was obvious that he followed the Kenya principle that the service started when everyone is present. People walked for many miles across the countryside to be present, or travelled from nearby Nairobi to be with their family for one of their rare breaks from busy city life. During the service, each family came forward in turn to be blessed by the Bishop and he took his time to pray with each family group. The service itself lasted for over five hours, but it was one of the most memorable and meaningful services I've ever attended.

So much of our culture is about saving or cutting time, to make things more efficient. Yet ironically the original use of regulated clock time was to create a daily rhythm for prayer and worship in monastic life. Keeping an eye on the time of the day was to build a pattern into the day to stop and pray: to enable people to structure their lives in ways that were faithful to their beliefs and spiritual way of life. Are there moments, even if you lead an incredibly busy life, when you can slow down and build in these rhythms of prayer and worship into your day? Where do we allow ourselves the time to encounter God in our busy lives?

Some days, when life is busy, I've found it difficult to make more time than just listening to the *Pray as You Go* podcast early in the morning in bed with a cuppa. Other times, I've found slowing down my Bible reading has been helpful, reading the same psalm over a week, allowing any insights to filter through gradually. Each of us will have our own ways to slow down and allow space to encounter God. Some find it helpful to find a quiet place to pray at a regular time each day.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I've found playing or listening to music is often a spiritual experience for me. It helps me to slow down and put aside other distractions, so I can be receptive to pray, to listen and to worship.

Or sometimes I've found that slowing down works best when I am walking alongside and listening to others. If you've had the opportunity to walk with others, you'll know that this can be a very spiritual experience. It slows us down to experience the world at a particular pace, to spot things we might have missed before. It gives us time to listen to the other person, to reflect on what has been said, to take the time to consider what to say. And it is true that one of the greatest gifts we can offer someone else is our time, focused wholly on them.

So how is God calling us to transform our minds and to deal with our time? Is it in the need to slow down, to listen to God's voice, to see the needs of others around us and walk at a different pace to the world around us? How might God be challenging us this week to slow down, to transform ourselves and renew our minds, so that we can serve Him and others around us?

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.' (Romans 12.1-2)

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