



Time

Redeeming the Gift

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

WE ARE PROBABLY MORE AWARE THAN ANY PREVIOUS GENERATION of how we have polluted and exploited our beautiful planet. Every day, the news brings fresh evidence of the ravages humans have exacted upon the spaces we inhabit. We recognize now that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis.

What we are, perhaps, slower to recognize is that our ecological crisis also reflects a theological crisis. The earth we have polluted is none other than God's creation. The Book of Genesis expresses in unforgettable language the great act of creation: With power and love, God brings forth dry land from the watery void, and in successive stages creates a wondrous world filled with every kind of plant and animal, and at creation's climax, makes humankind. To these humans is entrusted the incalculably important task of caring for this dazzlingly complex and precious work of God. "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."¹

But Genesis goes on to describe in tragic verses humankind's Fall from grace and its dire consequences. Humans, who were created to live in harmony with the whole of creation, were doomed to experience a profound sense of rupture and alienation: "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life."² They would now live in a fundamentally 'disordered' relationship with all of creation.

Looking around us now, it is not difficult to see traces of this disordered relationship with creation in our lives. On a global scale, we see how our greed and insatiable appetite for more have encouraged us to plunder and exploit the earth's resources in irresponsible and unsustainable ways, as we live with the consequent pollution and global warming. And in our individual lives, we are becoming aware that our disordered and unsustainable relation to the created order is a cause of malaise and great suffering.

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Now, there is another gift from God, given in creation, which is equally fundamental to our

1 Genesis 1:26

2 Genesis 3:17

well-being as our relationship with the Earth. This gift, too, has been abused and polluted, although the destructive effects of this abuse may be less immediate for us to discern. This is the gift of TIME.

Abraham Heschel, in his classic book *The Sabbath* observes:

One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar? It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* is used for the first time: in the book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness. This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place – a holy mountain or holy spring – whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.³

We have each been given the gift of time, and of all the gifts God has created, time is uniquely holy: "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it."⁴ Time is the medium in which we are able to live and move and have our being. Without time, what would this beautiful creation be – humankind included – but a lump of inert matter? God animates matter in time and sets it into motion through history. By God's grace, we live in time and through time. And so, either deliberately or unthinkingly, to pollute time is a recipe for great suffering: We are polluting the very medium in which we live, as surely as we have polluted the air and the oceans around us. For us to live in a disordered relationship with time can be just as damaging as living in a disordered relationship with the created world. And just as surely, it is killing us.

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In the Monastery, we Brothers live a very ordered life. We have a schedule that determines our waking and our sleeping, when we work and when we eat. The bell calls us, surely and unchangingly, to prayer, ten minutes before the liturgy begins, five times each day. Look at our schedule, and it will probably appear that every day in a Monastery is the same, week in and week out. Furthermore, as a monastic community in the Episcopal church, we also follow a liturgical year that assures us, month by month, year after year, that we will keep the

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1995

⁴ Genesis 2:3

same feasts, recall the same holy days. On a given time of a given day, we Brothers can tell you, with some confidence, where we will probably be, and what we will probably be doing, at that same time the next year, and the year after that.

From the outside, it might seem that we Brothers should have the ordering of time all figured out. If only that were true! We actually often have to admit that we come to the Monastery because we are particularly bad at living an ordered life.

Even in the Monastery, it is difficult for us to keep true to the use of time that our Rule prescribes. We Brothers are as prone as anyone to overwork, to misuse time. It's a constant problem. And when the Chapel bell rings, making us stop our work by calling us to the Divine Office, it can sometimes be rather annoying! It sounds out across the Monastery and forces us to stop what we are doing – probably right when we were in the thick of it – and we sigh a little, because what we were doing just then was no doubt something that seemed quite important. But the bell reminds us that, actually, we're not here just to work, just to do and to accomplish. We're here to glorify God by our lives. The bell, which makes us stop, actually calls us back to our truest identity.

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As I reflect on my own life and upon the lives of the many people I have ministered to, I become increasingly aware of how much stress, suffering, and anxiety derives from our pollution of time. There are so many ways that we can make time out to be our enemy. Colloquially, we talk about “killing time,” and what we mean by that is wasting time, frittering it, trying to get rid of it. Time itself seems to be our enemy, some unwanted burden. And so we find ways to “kill” it, squander it, throw it away – on the internet, perhaps, or in some mindless interaction with our cell phone, the video console, or other technologies of distraction. We are always on the look-out for ways to feel “free” from time; we seek moments we can blissfully call a “time out of time.”

It's no wonder if we sometimes feel the urge to escape time, since, more often than not, it feels as if time itself is out to get us. In our struggles to keep up with our demanding and relentless schedules, time, this holy gift from God, begins to feel like something of a demon, whipping at our backs. “I just don't have enough time!” we cry, again and again.

But if we never feel that there is enough time, there is something wrong with us, and not with time! God created time. God created it, and God called it holy. There is enough time. “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance . . . a time to seek and a time to lose.”⁵ These wise words from the Book of Ecclesiastes point

5 Ecclesiastes 3:1-6

to a profound truth: When we feel that we do not have enough time, the issue is not with time, but with our use of time. We feel we do not have enough time because we do not have enough of it to accomplish certain goals, fill certain needs, meet certain expectations. The problem is not with time, but with our use of it, our attitude toward it. “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven,” and if we can only get in touch with a right attitude toward time, if we can recover the holiness of time, then we will know that every moment is enough.

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Every moment is pregnant with possibilities beyond our imagining. Not to see that truth is to have a disordered vision of the gift of time, unfolding before us and for us, in every moment. I love that phrase from the renowned historian Arnold Toynbee, who referred to a theory of history and the passage of time as “just one damned thing after another.” For many people, that is what their life feels like, and it highlights the profundity of our disordered relationship to time. Time is not an endless succession of things to do, bitter sighs, tired nights, and disappointments. Time is a gift from God.

Each new day will never come again, which makes it incredibly precious. *Carpe diem*, the ancient philosophers urged, “Seize the day.” Each new day asks of us, in the words of our contemporary, Mary Oliver, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”⁶ Your one wild and precious life could stretch on for decades, or it could just be today. What are you going to do, who are you going to be, in that time?

A redeemed way of understanding and relating to time asks us to see every moment as significant and having meaning as part of a whole. There is meaning to our lives: We have been given this period of time, this one wild and precious life, in limited amount, in order to become the person that God created us to be. How we use the time allotted to us in this life is how we glorify God in our lives. As Irenaeus wrote, “The glory of God is the person fully alive.”⁷

God put us here, and God has given us this time, in order that we might become fully alive. Jesus promises, “I came that you may have life and life in abundance.”⁸ Reordering our relationship to time is one of the chief ways in which we can access that abundant life Jesus promised us, and that glory for which God created us.

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⁶ Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1990

⁷ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*, Book 4, Chapter 20, c. 175-185 CE

⁸ John 10:10

This life is a dance, and we cannot move through it meaningfully and beautifully without having a sense of the rhythm to which our life responds. None of us want to live in monotone, being victims of the relentless drumroll of the to-do list. In order to flourish, we need a rich and varied, but consistent rhythm of life: We need to listen for and respond to the call of different tempos and tunes; we need rests.

Take heart that any small step you try in reordering your time will probably leave you a better steward of your time than you were the day before. Over the course of the next year, we Brothers will be thinking and teaching about Time. We need to learn to take time to stop, pray, work, play, and love in order to be fully alive, as God intended. We hope that you'll join us and catch the life!

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE was born in Wales and studied theology at Cambridge University before training to be a priest at Westcott House theological college. He came to the United States fifteen years ago to join SSJE and has pursued a ministry of teaching, spiritual direction, and retreat leading, and for three years he served as chaplain to the House of Bishops. Before coming to SSJE he served as a parish priest in the diocese of St. Albans, as well as the head of the department of theology at Oundle School, a large Anglican high school in the English Midlands.

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Time

Redeeming the Gift

Transfiguration

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