

## **WORKING AND TIMING: what has God got to do with holiday trading?**

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At Christmas and Easter, though not so much on Anzac Day, some retailers complain that they are not permitted to open their businesses. Admittedly, there are anomalies since some are allowed to open; it still represents a striking change, however, when some retailers find it a hardship that may not open on three and a half days a year. It is not so long ago in New Zealand that shops were closed for two days every weekend and at Christmas and New Year, and for four days at Easter. Some retailers argue that their margins are now so tight, or that ‘we are just coming out of recession’ that they cannot afford to close for even three and a half days a year.

It is a question, however, whether this is always so. It may be more difficult for some individually-owned businesses, but Jake Slykhuis, who declined to open three Mitre 10 stores on Sundays says that ‘[t]he stores were performing well on the six days a week they were open.’<sup>i</sup> It is also hard to believe that tight margins are only a recent phenomenon, and there have been many recessions in the past. Given the much greater emphasis on economic activity recently (sometimes almost to the exclusion of other activities), it seems likely that a prevailing ethos of always doing more business, is responsible for the concern about not being able to trade.

Of course the desire to trade as often as possible is nothing new. As long ago as the eighth century BCE the prophet Amos accused traders of anguishing, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?’ (8:5).<sup>ii</sup> These ancient traders would have been envious of today’s retailers since the latter do not have to agonise when the sabbath (Sunday in New Zealand) will be over—they have completely eliminated it as far as trading is concerned. Amos addresses his traders as ‘you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land’ (v. 4). Today’s retailers do not necessarily do that directly but the address should cause them to consider how an ethos of continuous business activity to the exclusion of much else affects not only their own lives but those of other people.

### **Choice**

Some say that all they want is for everyone to have a choice. This is strongly expressed in statements by Rotorua MP Todd McClay about his Easter Trading Bill. He wanted MPs ‘to allow local communities *to choose* whether to open on Easter Sunday.’ ‘My bill will *offer choice*’, he is quoted as saying; ‘[t]his is *about choice*, equality and the right of people to decide for themselves’. (My emphases.)<sup>iii</sup> Choice punctuates the whole statement, and this is the main criterion on which the case is based, rather than whether it is right when all the people and issues concerned are taken into consideration.

It is a question whether everyone is equal in choice. Jake Slykhuis maintains that the Mitre 10 ‘head office had “continuously” put pressure on him to open on Sundays.’ Mitre 10 says it did not though all stores ‘are “encouraged” to open seven days a week.’ Jake Slykhuis counters by saying that the pressure ‘included a visit on the subject’. Choices are not made by different people in vacuums sealed off from each other; the choices of one affects the choice of another.

### **Making all time the same**

Choice to work on holidays is a choice for doing even more of one thing: trading on every day of the year is one expression of wanting to make all time the same, and seeing only one kind of time as crucial. This is expressed in another way in a TV advertisement: 'In an ideal world you would be on holiday all the time.' The absurd vacuity of this is underlined as it is accompanied by a man dozing on a deckchair. It actually has the effect of making you realise that there is a time for work.

Being on holiday all the time would be a boring monotony. But there are times for holi(y)days. It is not simply the same when a worker gets 'a day off in lieu'. On a holiday there is a general atmosphere of sharing: Christmas dinner for example is not the same if it is not on Christmas Day with as many of the family as possible. This also has a specifically religious application: even the renewed life expressed by the resurrection is at its most specific when celebrated on the Sunday morning of Easter Day. Indeed some would say that there is nothing to beat a service at *dawn*. What about having a R.S.A. parade at 10a.m. on the Monday after Anzac Day? So the significance of time can sometimes be narrowed down to hours: the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month has been of particular significance for millions of people. Christians who say that they are responding to Christmas and Easter every Sunday (why only Sunday?) are probably not being realistic about the need to concentrate on specifics.

Attempting to make all time the same runs against the streams of the rhythms of life, of the rest and fulfilment that comes after a measured period of work; such rest and fulfilment certainly formed an important part of the significance of the Old Testament/Jewish Sabbath. One might say indeed that it is the relationship with rest that gives work itself its significance. When fulfilment is combined with rest, it leads to appreciation both of what has been done and also to hope for what can still be done through what has been achieved already. We need time for such ongoing fulfilment.

### **Ordinary time**

The more ordinary time after special times also has its own significance. Both Christmas and New Year are times when we can celebrate new beginnings—and in different ways—but after all the preparation they are quickly over and we enter a period when we need to find our way again through ordinary time. It can also be a time when we realise that ordinary time comprises different circumstances and events that concern not only us but also other people(s) and the world. As we become deliberately conscious of this, we may realise that our ordinary time is not so humdrum as often assumed.

Further, God can be made known in this re-enlivened relationship with events, people(s) and the world. People often say, 'religion is private', and this may be the reason why they see religion connected only with something detached from whole people's relation with each other and from their involvement with a complex of circumstances and events. But many people realise that God can be made known through their relation with each other and in their involvement with diverse circumstances and events. This has a particularly sharp profile when people become aware that time is not always the same but takes on many dimensions. Through this realisation, the relation with people, circumstances and events becomes re-enlivened, and God is known in that dimension of renewed life as deflated time changes into significant time of relations beyond our own concerns.

The God who is no longer something we just happen to believe in becomes the someone of renewal in ordinary, even deflated times. We can only respond to such a God, and this response itself may combine with the realisation that we can also respond to the great events of the world. When, for example, there is a catastrophe that devastates parts of the natural world, kills many people and makes others homeless, some people may never hear about it all because their preoccupations with work leave no room for times of emergency elsewhere. Others may think or say, 'that's awful', but assume that it is on a scale that 'couldn't happen here'. But rather than being a time to pass on thinking, 'thank goodness it didn't happen here', it can be one to deliberate that such natural and human events ram a special and challenging time into our ordinary times, and call us to do what we can in restitution both in thought and in deed.

Great events do after all affect ordinary places and people. Volcano dust can disrupt airports in many different places and confuse the plans of ordinary people wanting to celebrate the times of weddings and funerals. Or, wars turn ordinary people into refugees. Some of them may be those least equipped to deal with their plight. These are times when regular work takes a back seat; it is a matter of sheer survival. People in past time, however, who witness to such circumstances also provide a resource for people in the present faced with comparable circumstances. For example, the Book of Jeremiah describes people who have been exiled to a foreign country returning home and among them are those with disabilities or labouring under special difficulties: 'among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together;' some come with weeping (31:8-9).

So great events do involve ordinary people; on the one hand, they may be ill equipped to deal with them but on the other they can make a creative response to them. Especially those who have known God as a dimension of renewal in deflated times may find that this combines with knowing God in further unexpected ways. One of the ways in which the Bible makes God known is to present God not merely in one way but through a combination of different aspects. For example, Jeremiah is describing people who had once been removed by force into exile. But now, he does not present God using even greater force, but has God saying to the returning exiles, 'I have become a father to Israel' (31:9).

In this context God as father means one who restores rather than one who uses force. It is possible that, for the people of Jeremiah's time, this was unexpected. They may have thought of God more as a king than as a father. God the dimension of renewal in deflated times combines with being surprised by God in an unexpected role, and perhaps a more personal one. God is neither aloofly detached from renewal in deflated times nor from restoration, but is effective through them. This does not necessarily happen at one time in a clear demonstration; such realisation may come later when those concerned have had time to pause and reflect. Not all times are those when it is possible to do that, but neither are all times those of trial.

Once God has been seen in new dimensions, other aspects of God are likely to combine with them. Jeremiah's poem begins with a call to the people to respond themselves. They are not simply to assume they got back home somehow but are to acknowledge it as a remarkable event (31:7). As Jeremiah expresses it earlier (31:2), 'The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness'. God is the one to whom there is an absolute need to respond.

Then later in the poem, as soon as God has been spoken of as father to Israel, there is a call to the *nations* as well: they are also to acknowledge God, this time as a shepherd (31:10). Response to God in some way cannot be confined to one people.

The poem then proceeds to a still further dimension: knowing God as restorer in a particular situation of life as a special time can also lead to renewed appreciation of ordinary, continuous times. Indeed it almost follows as a matter of course that people who know God in ordinary matters as well as great events and in relation to other peoples will also make their response to God in terms of creation: in Jeremiah 31:12, they come and sing aloud, being ‘radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden...’

### **Service to the land**

This comprehensive statement of creation presents times of joy in the cultivation and pastoralizing of the land. These are times that even those who cultivate the land as their regular work can appreciate. But those who do not also need times when they work in a different way and when they appreciate what the land gives them. Such a time reminds us that there is a time for ceasing to give service to customers in order to give service to the land from which all we have to service customers comes. It may be that when we do see this as an essential time and activity that we then appreciate with Jeremiah that we are also responding to God. For when we give service to the land, then we can know that we too are creatures and can have a sense of the Creator.

It is when we are ‘very earnestly digging’ that we ‘lift [our] head sometimes, and look at the mountains,/ And muse upon them, muscles relaxing.’ Ursula Bethell’s poem ‘Pause’ is an almost perfect expression of work and rest and of the time needed for fulfilment.<sup>iv</sup> Anyone who knows something of Ursula Bethell’s life can hardly doubt either that Psalm 121:1 forms the background to her musing: ‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.’

Knowing God in a combination of ordinary times and great happenings with our own and others’ response to creation, may also combine with a response to the address of scripture. Indeed it may be that part of the combination through which God is most clearly introduced. It is of course possible to respond to a combination of great events and working in the garden without responding to God. But when scripture, for example in the shape of Jeremiah 31 and Psalm 121, is inserted into our looking and musing, we hear the witness to God of other people in other times and places; it may then become a witness that convinces and draws us in at this time and perhaps even at the place of our work.

### **Conclusion**

The desire to make all time the same is an act of deprivation. We are deprived of the rhythms of life and of the rest and fulfilment that comes after work, which itself contributes to that work. Observing special times at the right times in community with other people can be combined with ordinary times and adds significance to them all reciprocally. It is in such combining dimensions that God may become the dimension of renewal as ordinary time changes into significant time of relations that draw the concerns of others into ours. Such concerns may also be those of our fellows at work.

This combining of special with ordinary times themselves combine with knowing God in new and unexpected dimensions. This is especially so when there has been time to pause and reflect, leading to the response that an act of restoration is not to be taken for granted, but is to be acknowledged as crucial for the future life now possible. God may enter into the acknowledgment itself, leading to a response to God in terms of other peoples and creation. This will often be at a particular time, for example when cultivating and pastoralizing the land. At this time, God may be appreciated as the creator both of land and ourselves as we commit ourselves to being servants of the land. Those who are servants to the land are also likely to be more fully grown servants in whatever work they do.

All this may combine with scripture, often as heard or read at a particular time, becoming the medium of God's address to us as well as of our response to God. The witness of other people and places to God in their time may address us in our time and at our work. God with time and work changes one time into a combination of times, and such combination of times shows that making all time the same is a deprivation.

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<sup>i</sup> Jake Slykhuis, 'Mitre 10 owner takes Sunday trading stand,' <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2831273/Mitre-10-owner-takes-Sunday-trading-stand> [accessed July 14, 2010].

<sup>ii</sup> Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version except for Psalm 121, which is from the Authorised, King James Version.

<sup>iii</sup> Todd McClay MP, 'Rotorua MP to introduce Easter Sunday Trading Bill to Parliament,' <http://www.toddmccclay.co.nz/index.php?/archives/2-Rotorua-MP-to-introduce-Easter-Sunday-Trading-Bill-to-Parliamen.html> [accessed July 14, 2010]

<sup>iv</sup> Ursula Bethell, 'Pause', *Collected Poems*, Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997 [1985]), p. 2.