

Stop! Take a Breath



“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”, (Matthew 11:28).

The birds above are resting on a handy post as they ponder dark rain clouds and a choppy sea. Instead of resting, work and busyness can overtake our lives as we prepare for Christmas. There are so many things to do before the holiday season descends with its summer heat and the lurking fear of bushfires. We feel a victim of this festive season. It is not so enjoyable as it could be. Celebratory family gatherings can exhaust rather than refresh us, and afterwards we find ourselves empty and dejected, longing for ‘normal’ life.

First we are worried and anxious about the extra work and plans for Christmas, and later troubled by a lack of things to do—what is the matter with us?

At the beginning of Genesis, we read about God’s creation of the world,

its emergence from watery darkness to light, land, plants, animals and later humans. The process is described as happening over six days. In this story, work done each 'day' is declared by God as 'good'. But on the seventh day, the final day of the week, "God rested from all the work that he had done" (Genesis 2:3). The seventh day is blessed and made holy by God. Rest is shown as a vital part of life, something we as human beings, made in the image of God, need for our well-being.

We know that our bodies benefit from having an adequate amount of refreshing sleep each night, but I suggest they also need another sort of rest. This is a rest from the daily work that we need to do, to something different that is healing and nourishing for our bodies and minds.

People might encourage us to go away for a holiday, or relax on a cruise ship sailing around the Pacific Islands, but this is not always possible, if at all! On the other hand, I believe there are opportunities present each day when God's life can be restored within us.

As part of God's creation, it is easy for us to share in the delights of our world by becoming more aware of its beauty, sounds and smells. If a sunrise or sunset catches our attention as we move quickly from one activity to another, let us stop for a few moments and gaze at it, appreciate its amazing beauty. Be prepared to look not just for what flowers we might pick in the garden, but to admire their colour, perfume and shape. When we take a tea or coffee break, perhaps we can go outside and allow ourselves to be absorbed in nature for a few minutes, listening to bird calls, and possibly interacting with a pet animal.

We may look at a river or out to sea, visit an exhibition and let a painting or sculpture speak to us of something we find difficult to put into words. To stop, and deliberately listen to or play music is healing and refreshing for many people.

Immersing ourselves in activities we enjoy provides us with an inner refreshment. These may include gardening, sport, dancing, reading, writing, painting, woodwork, preparing a meal, and even eating with conscious respect for and appreciation of the food. Depending on our physical state, we may choose to run for the pleasure of running and

feeling the wind on our face. These experiences are not seen as hard work or eating to keep ourselves alive, but delights that for a short time involve our whole being.

Casual relationships can also lift our mood. When out shopping we might notice the respectful and kind way someone treats another, or we can respond positively to an unexpected smile from a stranger. Such brief experiences can be remembered and relived later in our imagination, even shared with a friend.

Times of prayer with others or alone, are always opportunities to be aware of God's presence with us. In moments of stillness we can become conscious of God's Spirit present within and between our bodies and the bodies of others, surrounding and perhaps healing them.

Jesus was refreshed and strengthened not only by sleep, but also by praying to God with his friends in the synagogue (Luke 4:16), and at a meal (John 17); and alone, in a desert place (Mark 1:12) and in a garden (Matthew 26).

So, how can these moments of pausing and awareness benefit us as we enter the stress before Christmas and of emptiness afterwards? For Christians, Christmas is a holy time of the year when we remember that God, out of love, chose to be with us born as a baby, accepting all the joys and suffering of human life. This same God still comes in love to be present with us wherever we find ourselves.

Let the decorations in shops and advertisements on television focus us not on buying presents, but on God's gift of Jesus' birth. Stop, like the birds on the post, and take a breath. For a few moments let us intentionally open ourselves to God's love and presence. There in our pain and joy God will meet us, and restore us with new life.

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