

If I were to ask you for a word you most associate with Sloth, what would it be?

I'm guessing most of us have come to understand Sloth as manifestations of laziness, as epitomised in the brilliant 'Ice Age' movies by the loveable Sid Sloth.

But this only gives us one window of perspective into its wider meaning. So today I'm using the Greek word ACEDIA to describe this sin that can be so deadly to the human soul. In Christian theology it describes a profound state of spiritual apathy. Anything that causes us to feel *indifference* to the things of God. Even *resistance* to the things of God.

So we can hear the promise of Jesus that he came to bring us the good news of life in all its fullness, but we're not feeling it. We can hear the promise we heard today from Jesus - that if we remain in his love – remain in an authentic intimate relationship with Him: will know a bedrock of joy that will overflow into all aspects of our life – but we can still struggle to know it. It's not that we don't believe this promise, we just recognise a disconnect between what we believe and what we are experiencing.

I should give a word of clarification here. I'm not exploring the illness of depression which is complex and multi layered. Too many Christians have been made to feel wrongly that they shouldn't experience depression because of their faith. This is a specific exploration of one aspect of spiritual well-being.

Even the desert monks had a phrase for this spiritual malaise of Acedia. They called it the *Noonday Demon*. They noticed how they could get caught up in a spiritual crisis that tended to manifest around midday.

The fact that this spiritual disconnect could affect hard core religious devotees like the Desert Fathers is why Acedia has made its way into the seven deadly sins. It's a recognition that everyone of us who follows Jesus, needs to guard our hearts from this spiritual disconnect and the places it can take us.

Our reading from the book of Hebrews is the author sending words of encouragement to a church community to resist this spirit of Acedia. **"Let us strip off every weight that slows us down and causes us to grow weary and lose heart. Especially the sin that so easily entangles. Travel your faith journey with perseverance and endurance."**

'The sin that so easily entangles' is such a good description. Because the spirit of acedia has a way of creeping up on us and squeezing the spirit of aliveness from our soul. Who of us doesn't have times when the weight and darkness of the world dims the light in our soul? Saps our spirit of endurance.

Pope John Paul 2nd quoted the wisdom of St Thomas. **"Acedia is sadness arising from the fact that the good is difficult."** When the weight of the world jades our hearts, we can feel a weary cynicism towards the task of aspiring to all that is true, noble, lovely and admirable. Indifference and resistance to the things of God.

But of all these wisdoms on Acedia my favourite is from **Pope Francis**. **"The demon of acedia wants to destroy the simple joy of the here and now, the grateful wonder of reality; it wants to make you believe that it is all in vain - that nothing has meaning - that it is not worth taking care of anything or anyone."**

Does any of this strike a chord in your soul?

Because there's a lot happening in this world that can take all of us to this place.

- **Do you recognise the weight of the world squeezing out the simple joy of the here and now.**
- **Is it dulling your capacity to feel exhilarated by the grateful wonder of reality?**
- **Do you sometimes get to the place of feeling as if all is in vain and doubting the hope of your faith?**

Scripture is full of wisdom warnings of how the spirit of acedia can begin take hold and entangle all of us. And in the process disconnect us from the life-giving blood of our faith.

So let's take a few minutes to explore some of the 'weights' that can slow us down.

That can cause us to grow spiritually weary and lose heart?

In a modern context of psychology, Acedia describes a profound burnout, loss of purpose and a sense of despair. Which is why many commentators see the spirit of acedia as the dis-ease of our times. Even if it's not the word they'd give it.

We've all heard the reports (and we witness with our own eyes) how so many of the younger generation are caught in a spirit of despair and hopelessness that's affecting their emotional and spiritual well-being.

In his book **Acedia and Its Discontents** R J Snell said this. "[Acedia is no longer a vice afflicting individuals only, it has become a cultural reality; nestled deep in the roots of our ways of acting and living, sloth seeps into our loves and lives in virtually every domain, before finally transforming itself into sadness, boredom and if not checked nihilism.](#)"

I've had many conversations with people saying they don't just feel a 'normal tired'. They feel weary to their bones. Exhausted by the relentless overwhelm of depressing news and sensory overload. We have more information, stimulation, and gratification than any other human in history, but at the same time we are suffering from a crisis of meaning and purpose.

Do any of us believe this **isn't** connected?

In her book ***Fully Alive, Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times***, Elizabeth Oldfield contends very strongly, that all of us are now caught up in a **spiritual battle** against the ever-present demon of distraction and relentless busyness. She also points out that Acedia means '**to neglect**' and she asks a very telling question.

- How much does this demon of distraction and busyness cause us to neglect our spiritual life and well-being? With so much competing for our attention, how much does this come at the cost of our relationship with God and cause us to take our eyes off Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith?

The fact that you and I are here today shows us that we do take our spiritual formation seriously. We are persevering with the faith journey God has set before us. And we do know the importance of keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. But here's another telling question about the demon of distraction.

Can any relationship flourish if we don't invest time into it?

So how many of us here would have to confess - that we probably have more of an intimate relationship with our phones than we do with God. More time with the phone in our hands than with our hands together in prayer? Remember the words we say we at the beginning of the service "**Spirit of God search our Hearts**". Don't worry we have confession time later.

What I want to do now, is show a 3-minute video now from Pete Greig because it gives us another searching perspective on the insidious nature of Acedia. For those who don't know Pete Greig is the founder of the World-Wide 24/7 Prayer network and also Lectio 365, a Spiritual formation app that many in this congregation use daily. When I first came across this video it really hit home, because it shows us just how seductive and deceptive the spirit of acedia can be.

But one more quote for a context.

["Sloth, is as much a problem for the world's busy people as it is for its loafers. Sloth encourages us to believe that 'restless busyness' is a noble form of fulfilling our duties. When in reality it's often a form of escapism from the tasks that really require our attention, above all loving God and our neighbours."](#)

Richard Hughes.

SHOW VIDEO

I wonder which of those observations resonated for you?

I just want to draw out a few of those truths that resonated for me. And can I say straightaway that this wisdom isn't just for Christian leaders. It's a wisdom warning for every follower of Jesus involved in every walk of life.

The first truth that really hit home for me, was the observation that Jesus was **officially less busy than almost every Christian leader you've ever met. And more fun.** Because I've been down this road and I've seen it in so many others. All of us can get so caught up in being efficiently productive - efficiently 'in control' - efficiently presenting our 'glittering image' to the world - efficiently trying to optimize and schedule every aspect of our work and family life - that we leave very little time for our spiritual life. Fun and joy! And little by little, if we're not careful, we can slowly drift into the spiritual state of ACEDIA. Anyone recognise the truth of how we can all get caught up in 'being reactive' with an **"overdeveloped sense of duty which can half crucify you in all the wrong ways"**. Again, not just for Christian leaders. Anyone who's a parent will recognise the times our *'over developed sense of duty'* towards our children has resulted in states of family exhaustion, even relational dysfunction.

When I first arrived here at St George's from the UK in 2010 there'd been many years where the focus of Ministry leadership had been very much on numerical growth. Don't hear this as a criticism -there was some amazing fruit borne from this time.

But this focus meant we had 4 services on a Sunday. 7.45, 9am, 10.45 and the 7pm evening service mostly for young adults. For 7 years I was heavily involved in every one of these services every Sunday, and I saw the cost to my own family. Our daughter Myah was 6 when we arrived and I still carry the sadness and the guilt of knowing that because of my *over developed sense of duty*, I sacrificed aspects of her childhood to the altar of my ministry efficiency.

I watched another interview with Pete Greig where he talked about his own moment of revelation. He was a highly successful speaker at Christian conferences, much admired and in demand but he was feeling dead inside, Acedia. And he had a confronting realisation - that he was preaching more **about** Jesus than **praying to** Jesus. Indifference and resistance to the things of God.

And this really is the heart of things.

Acedia is when you and I allow the 'stuff and swirl of life' to sideline the presence of God.

When we 'trade in' the intimacy of a personal relationship with Jesus for the 'stuff'.

When we lose sight of the most important truth. The Way of the Kingdom is not efficient, but it is beautiful. When we intentionally cultivate whatever is true, noble, lovely and admirable.

In today's Gospel Jesus had one desire for all of his followers. **9 "Remain in my love." "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me, so remain in My love.** Jesus invites you and I out of the 'stuff and swirl of life' and back into the place of intimacy with him. Life-giving relationship. As Pete Greig realised, the Good News is that Jesus is always more interested **in who we are and who we're becoming** over what we achieve and what we do,

So what might it look like for you this coming week to live in the Way of the Kingdom.

Not in the economy of efficiency but in the economy of Grace

In the economy of Grace, we live in sync with the slow work of God and the intimacy of sacred relationship. We live in sync with the simple joy of the here and now and the grateful wonder of reality. We enjoy being 'present' to people and place and we don't see it as 'wasting time'.

Jesus didn't care much for the way of efficiency. He focussed more on the beauty of relationships and time with friends. Even the Messiah found time to go fishing, enjoy picnics and parties. To have fun. On Friday night we did just this with our Matariki celebration.

I want to finish with a story of how I experienced the economy of grace over efficiency a few weeks back. I'd had a busy morning - was just about to get in the car go over to Takapuna to visit a parishioner - when I got a call from Olivia over at Knox. She told me that one of their residents Judith (who I didn't know and had never met) was in her final moments and her family wanted a priest to come over and be

with her. In that moment I recognised a response in me that was unsettling. And I can see with hindsight was the spirit of acedia. Indifference even resistance to the things of God.

Firstly, I recognised a flash of irritation at the interruption to my efficiently organised day.

But I also recognised a feeling of being bit daunted at the thought. I was feely weary - running on empty and I wasn't sure I was up to it.

Now I've visited many people in their dying moments and it's always a truly sacred moment: but I can still get nervous about walking into a room of family members in such a profound moment of intimacy. Will I say and pray the right words. Will I be adequate.

Anyway, I heard God chastening me to man up so I called Olivia and said I'll be over in 5 mins. And as I walked across, I prayed a prayer to God of surrender and trust for his providence and grace.

When I walked into the room and there was Judith and her 3 grown up children all in their 60's.

I asked for permission to sit next to Judith and I held her hand. Her eyes were completely closed the whole time, and she had the deep urgent breathing of those in their final moments.

I've done this enough times to know that even though the dying may show no response they're more aware than we think. So I said a prayer asking for Judith to know God's peace because on some level it must be a scary thing to know these is your final moments with your precious loved ones in the earthly realm.

I then asked the family if I could sing to Judith because I know the power of music to speak into these moments. The family said, 'of course', so I started singing *Be still and Know that I am God* to Judith. "*In thee O Lord do I put my Trust.*" And I was pretty close up to her so that she could hear me.

Then I started singing the first and last verse of *The Lord's my Shepherd*. Because the lyrics of the last verse are incredibly poignant for someone in their final moments. "*Goodness and mercy all my life - shall surely follow me. And in God's house forever more - my dwelling place shall be*'

As I was singing these words to Judith, she suddenly raised her head off the pillow towards my face - opened her eyes and looked directly into mine. And then she closed her eyes and lowered her head back on to the pillow. It was an incredibly profound moment of connection that is still with me.

Two strangers who have never met, but through the words of this beautiful psalm, something stirred and we shared a scared moment of deep connection. I turned around and her son and 2 daughters were shedding a few tears and we all sat there savouring this Grace Moment and the Beautiful Way of the Kingdom.

Now I understand this is not an everyday moment, even for a priest.

But the truth of what took place - I believe happens to every one of us every day.

We can all get caught in the spirit of Acedia. Indifferent and resistant to the things of God.

If my spirit of irritation and efficiency had got the better of me, I wouldn't have experienced the privilege and the gift of Judith. I wouldn't have experienced the simple joy of the here and now and the grateful wonder of this reality. Of what truly matters and makes us truly human.

That the Way of the Kingdom is not efficient, but it is beautiful.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where do you recognise the demon of distraction and busyness causing you to neglect your spiritual life and well-being?
- This week and beyond, cultivate more time in relationship with God than your phone.
- When you recognise the weight of the world squeezing out the simple joy of the here and now, or making you doubt the hope of our faith: remember Jesus inviting you back into an intimate life-giving relationship.

- Take one small action of being 'present' to people and place and don't see it as 'wasting time'. Cultivate 'Grace Moments'.