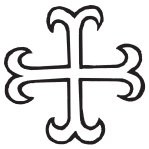
FINDING SANCTUARY

Monastic Steps for Everyday Life



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How Did I Get This Busy?

Recipes for busy mums, tips for busy teachers, workshops for busy executives – these are just some of the courses around today that help us cope with being too busy. People speak and act as if 'being busy' is a force beyond their control, as if somewhere back in history a malign spirit of busy-ness invaded the planet. There was a time, in the good old days, when people had time, and life moved at an easy pace. But 'modern society' changed all that and now we are stuck with a way of life that is a breathless rush. 'People don't have time like they used to' – and we all nod in agreement.

I have recently taken to asking those who come to the monastery on retreat where they find sanctuary in their lives today. Some of them admit frankly that they do not have any sanctuary; they are just too busy, and that is why they have come on retreat. This busy-ness is so endemic that even the act of coming on retreat for forty-eight hours evokes in them strong feelings of guilt. 'I've had to leave my spouse to look after the children,' they say, or 'I should be working'; and so they feel that simply being in the

monastery is self-indulgent. Then I ask them: 'Why have you allowed yourself to get into this state?' The question throws them, because until that moment most had assumed that the excessive busy-ness of their lives was somebody else's fault. They and many others have an unspoken assumption that 'modern life' is busy, that being busy is one of the penalties of living in a developed country in the twenty-first century and that one day they will make a life decision to escape from all this … but not yet.

'Busy' is, of course, a relative term, a fact humorously illustrated by the advertisement that shows a man on a bike stuck behind a stationary but solitary bus on a Caribbean island. The cyclist complains: 'Man, this is gridlock!' Leaving aside for the moment the relative nature of being busy, the foundations of our contemporary feeling of 'being too busy' are worth a closer look.

Put simply, if somebody says they are too busy, then either they *are* too busy or they *think* they are too busy. Either way, the responsibility lies with them; they choose to lead a busy life or they choose to think that they do. When I have said to people on retreat that they have chosen to be busy, they find this impossible to accept. Yet the experience of the five men seen in *The Monastery* suggests that this is truer than most people realise. Several of them had great difficulty just accepting that they didn't have much to do and that they had to be silent for long periods. Stillness and silence were truly foreign to them and, at first, not that welcome: Tony and Anthoney in particular

kept using their mobiles for days after their arrival and found it difficult to settle into not being busy. So some explanation is required of the way this choice for busy-ness is made. In Britain, it is rooted in the way life changed in the eighties, so a quick look at that upheaval may offer a fresh perspective on the pressures that make people so busy in Britain today. Other developed countries could tell similar stories.

Twentieth-century Britain once had a raft of organisations such as trade unions and professional bodies, which dictated much of the pace of ordinary life. For example, trade unions protected people from working long hours for poor pay and professional associations enabled doctors, lawyers and other professionals to regulate the way they worked. But by the 1980s British industry was falling behind commercially in the global economy and it fell to the Thatcher government to tackle the problem. Their solution was to destroy or reduce the power of institutions such as trade unions. This would enable market forces to operate more freely and so force the British economy to modernise; the demands of the market would now dictate every aspect of life. This applied not only to the working classes but to the professional classes as well. Far from protecting people, the state now sought to maximise competition in order to ensure that market forces decided everything in the lives of its citizens. For example, the national institutions that provided water, gas and electricity were sold off to private companies, which cut costs while trying to meet the demands of

the customer in new ways. Even the National Health Service had to create an 'internal market'.

'WE'RE ALL CUSTOMERS NOW'

This market economy led inevitably to the emergence of a consumerist approach to life, with the slogan: 'Let the customer decide.' In this consumerist world, people are offered the promise of purchasing whatever they choose from an ever-expanding range of continuously improving products. In the traditional marketplace the stallholders always sold the same thing in the same way, in the same place and at the same time; but in the modern marketplace everything is bigger and better than the last time, and it's available wherever and whenever you want it. So now, anywhere at any time, you can buy the latest version of everything. While theoretically the consumer can say, 'I've had enough,' and stop consuming, in fact the market works hard to make sure the consumer never says that.

So British society now defines a person as a consumer. This is neatly illustrated by the transition in announcements on the rail system by which travellers have ceased to be 'passengers' and have become 'customers' instead. Even schools and hospitals (and not only private ones) now treat pupils and patients as customers. We are all customers now.

Now this consumer-driven outlook is dependent on

some hidden assumptions: first, the assumption that there is an infinite supply of goods coming from an infinite production line. The second assumption is that the consumer will have to engage in endless productive work in order to earn the money to fund the endless consumption.

Where the professional classes once led a leisurely life, now they have become stressed out. Where the working man once relied on a job for life in a stable industry, now 'he got on his bike and looked for work'. We are all in thrall to consumption, both our own consumption and that of the customers who provide our wages. This is the context with which we have chosen to collude and we are all too busy as a result. In this sense, we *choose* to be too busy.

In simple terms, the consumerist lifestyle forces people to work too hard in order to fulfil their consumer ambitions. The desire for the bigger car or the better holiday drives people to overwork and those caught up in this cycle have difficult decisions to make about whether to give up some of these ambitions in order to make room for sanctuary. Armed with this understanding, you can stand back from our culture and question it. You are a free person and you can choose how busy you want to be. Freely choosing to resist the urge to busy-ness is the frame of mind you need before you can take any steps towards finding sanctuary.

'GET AWAY FROM IT ALL?'

Much of the modern tourist industry is built on the assumptions I have just outlined. The promise of a respite from being too busy fuels the language of travel brochures: 'Want to get away from it all? Take the family to Disney World!' Tourism offers temporary respite from this world of frantic busy-ness by offering yet another consumer product as the antidote: the package holiday. All the hard work needed to be a consumer now needs an extra consumer product to take away the pain of that work.

The 'it all' of 'get away from it all' is an assumed world of ceaseless activity to which there is no answer other than to leave it behind for a week or two by going on holiday. Even before the '80's, the hippy movement of the sixties and seventies inadvertently canonised this belief in the inevitability of busy-ness by inviting us to 'drop out' from society; if dropping out was the only solution, this implied that changing society was impossible. People are assumed to be too busy because they have to run too fast in order to survive in this greedy and aggressive society.

As well as tourism, other industries are springing up around the 'too busy' belief: health spas called 'Sanctuary', offering 'heaven'; radio stations called 'Smooth' offering relaxation and 'alternative therapies' that 'eliminate all stress'. Now these relaxation products are valuable offerings, but they only deal in symptoms.

Alongside these solutions to busy-ness are answers in a different mode; a response I have had from some people coming here on retreat was: I can't stand having nothing to do, my hobby keeps my hands and mind focused on something other than my own troubles, in fact I *like* to keep busy. These are what one person called a sort of 'anti-sanctuary' – an alternative busy place to go to take your mind off things. Pets, sport, hobbies are all busy occupations, each a personally chosen busy-ness, an antidote to the enforced busy-ness of the consumerist society. Yet even these can be turned into consumer products designed to make this exhausting society more bearable but in turn creating more exhaustion.

The tourist 'get away from it all', the relaxation products and the pastimes are providing a respite and a refuge from the consumer/producer world of busy-ness but from *within* that world itself. They provide only temporary solutions because they are not addressing the real issues; like many consumer products they are 'instant' substitutes for the real thing. Instant coffee is a poor substitute for real coffee. For Benedict and the monastic tradition, the real thing is found in quite a different place.

MONKS AND BEING BUSY

By now you may well be asking yourself: but what do monks know about the pressures of modern life and how

busy people are? My reply is that while our society has in recent years given way collectively to busy-ness to an unprecedented degree, the temptation to busy-ness is not a new one. A story told by one of the desert fathers, Abbot Arsenius, illustrates this. Arsenius was a Roman senator in the late fourth century and tutor to the sons of the Emperor Theodosius. Aged just thirty-four, he secretly left Rome and sailed for Egypt – a mid-life crisis on a grand scale. But he was not eloping with a new partner to some paradise hideaway. He had gone to Egypt in order to join a community of monks, finally becoming a hermit renowned for his silence and austerity. Among the many stories told of him, the following one relates to our theme.

One day, in his cell, he heard a voice calling to him: 'Come and I will show you the works of men.' He followed the voice and it led him to a place where an Ethiopian was cutting wood and making a great pile. He struggled to carry the pile but in vain. Instead of taking some off, however, he cut more wood, which he added to the pile. Then once again he tried to carry it and once again he failed. He kept this up for a long time. Then the voice led Arsenius on further, to where a man was drawing water from a lake and putting it into a broken container so that the water ran back into the lake. Going on further still, he saw two men on horseback carrying a beam between them, one beside the other. They were trying to enter the door of a temple; but the beam would not fit crosswise and neither would draw back to let the other go first so that the beam might

go in lengthwise. The story concludes with the voice saying: 'Let everyone be watchful of his actions lest he labour in vain.'

That brief desert tale from a former leader of the superpower of his day is almost chilling in its relevance for us. We are piling high material wealth that we cannot carry and even when we succeed in carrying it, most disconcerting of all, our pride prevents us delivering it. The men on horseback are excluded from the temple; their pride prevents them entering the holy place where they might find rest. The fathers and mothers of the desert knew better than we do how being busy producing and consuming can be a substitute for facing the deeper realities of life. Unlike us, they resisted this tendency.

Drawing on this desert tradition, Benedict knew that as abbot he could spend too much time being busy with the wrong things: 'Above all, the abbot must not show too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to him'(Rule of St Benedict [RB], 2: 33). The 'above all' is telling: Benedict knew that this was a particular temptation for those in positions of responsibility. Rather than undertake the difficult task of looking into his own soul and the souls of his monks, the temptation for an abbot is simply to keep busy. So monks and lay people alike face the same temptation to busy-ness. The advantage we monks have is a tradition that acknowledges this danger and provides some remedies for dealing with it.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

The real antidote to busy-ness must be sought outside the consumerist world, and Benedict describes that place for us. He was aware of the barbarian world at his gate and he knew that he had to create a space beyond that world. In recent years my monastic brethren and I have taken to calling that space 'sanctuary'. Benedict does not use that term himself, but the word does sum up for a modern audience many of Benedict's deepest aspirations. Finding sanctuary leads us from the problem of busy-ness to a real spirituality that brings peace. The quest for sanctuary resonates deep into the heart of several contemporary dilemmas and at the same time contains within it the solution to these dilemmas.

For those in search of sanctuary the root meaning of the word itself actually describes where to look. 'Sanctuary' has two meanings: the primary meaning comes from the Latin root word, *sanctus*, meaning 'holy'. So the first meaning is 'a sacred space,' and deriving from this comes the secondary meaning: 'a place of refuge', a place where someone on the run can escape to. Put simply, the holiday packages and the relaxation techniques may provide the secondary meaning of 'sanctuary': namely, a refuge; but they certainly cannot provide the primary meaning: a sacred space. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that a consumerist place of refuge will always be insecure because it is not rooted in a sacred

space. The sacred cannot be manufactured by the consumerist society, because the sacred cannot be manufactured. The sacred is a given fact of life. The sacred is found when we recognise it as sacred; the sacred is not found when we recognise it simply as an item we fancy or as a convenient pause for breath. As one woman put it when she had been on retreat at Worth: 'I have started to understand that sanctuary is not just time out, a pause in a relentless continuum, but an opportunity to do some intense listening, made oddly unique through the company of others.'

In his Prologue to the Rule, Benedict lays down a simple basic marker about finding the sacred sanctuary: 'Let us ask the Lord: "Who will dwell in your tent, O Lord; who will find rest upon your holy mountain?" After this question, brothers, let us listen to what the Lord says in reply, for he shows us the way to his tent. "One who walks without blemish," he says, "and is just in all his dealings, who speaks the truth from his heart and has not practised deceit with his tongue."' (RB, Prologue: 23–6)

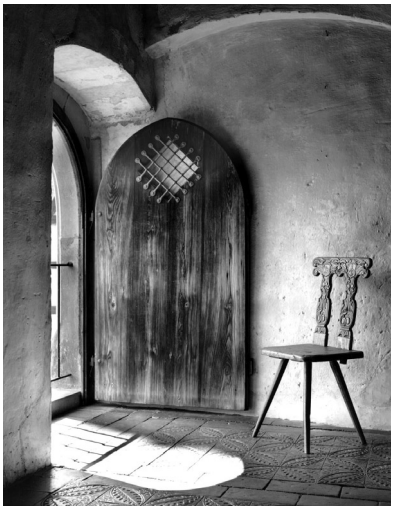
The basic starting point for entering sacred sanctuary is the quality of your day-to-day dealings with other people. You cannot mistreat people one moment and then find sanctuary the next. Finding the sacred space begins with the recognition of the sacred in your daily living.

This truism needs to be carefully unpacked by any person who is sincerely seeking sanctuary. It must not to be shrugged off with either 'Of course,' or 'I'm interested in

peace and quiet, not morals.' The peace that Benedict offers is symbolised by the motto of the Benedictine Order: this is the Latin word for peace, 'PAX', surrounded by a crown of thorns. There is no peace without sacrifice and there is no peace without justice. Those simple insights are most commonly applied to peace between nations or races, but they also apply to everybody's ordinary life and social relationships.

In *The Monastery* one of the participants, Tony Burke, reached a crisis point on the thirty-eighth of his forty days. He had taken his stay in the sanctuary of the monastery to heart. His job at that time was making videos to promote a sex chat-line and the thought of returning to his old way of life was worrying him. On his last night he had a profound experience of the presence of God and he knew his life would have to change. Among the several effects of this experience, one was that he gave up his job. He now works for a regular advertising agency and spends time each day in meditation. If you want to find the sacred space in your life, then you must want to 'walk without blemish'. You will, of course, fail to live without blemish; but failing is quite different from not even trying.

VIRTUE: THE DOOR TO THE SANCTUARY



In this chapter I hope I have opened up a new perspective on the origins of busy-ness, and on some contemporary solutions that cure the symptoms but not the disease. I want to end it by offering a way into sanctuary, a door through which we can enter sacred space. I have already hinted at it by saying that the way you lead your daily life is a key part of finding sanctuary. At the start of his Rule Benedict offers his monks a reminder that the ordinary decencies of human life are crucial to the spiritual search. The following short extract is a masterly summary of how to pursue human virtue as an essential part of the real spir-

itual life: 'You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when somebody needs your love. Bind yourself to no oath lest it prove false, but speak the truth with heart and tongue' (RB, 4: 22–7).

Before we can take a step into the sanctuary, we have to find the doorway and that doorway is virtue. To help you locate this doorway in your own life, I suggest that you take that extract from the Rule and use it as an examination of conscience. One way to do this is to take each sentence and put 'I' or 'my' into it. So now it reads: 'I do not act in anger or nurse a grudge. I rid my heart of all deceit. I never give a hollow greeting of peace and I never turn away when somebody needs my love. I speak the truth with heart and tongue.' If this personalised version is hard to say, then keep it before you as both a summons each morning and a checklist each night. Review the moments in which you have been true to those words and rejoice in those moments. Admit to yourself those moments of the day when you have failed to live out this ideal. Gradually, day by day, let the words move from your head to your heart until they start to shape your day and its relationships. The doorway to sanctuary is the doorway to your heart.

Interestingly, this kind of advice about virtue is now being written into codes of practice for businesses: deceit and lies have proved fatally destructive of some of the world's largest companies such as Enron, WorldCom and Andersen's. Put simply, virtue is necessary in professional

life today and traditional virtues are now being taught to executives. All this is part of the resurgence of virtue as a necessary part of the fabric of society. The signs are everywhere that the leaders of the consumer/producer society are themselves aware of many of this society's corrosive effects. They now see that virtue enables a person to protect and foster all that is best in their lives – both their personal lives and their professional lives. Virtue enables people to work with conviction and for the good of others; it prevents the vices sweeping us away into a busy whirl of chasing corrupt fantasies.

Of course, some business leaders see virtue as just a useful tool for increasing consumer confidence; they are annexing virtue into the consumerist society, making it another producible/consumable product. But what I am proposing is different from that. If we see virtue as simply the right way to live, no matter what the cost, then virtue is sacred. Virtue is the door into the sacred sanctuary because virtue is not a consumer product; it is not just a refuge from our anxieties nor a pause from a busy life; not something we can purchase in order to relieve the symptoms of modern life. Virtue is the recognition of the sacred in daily life. As we open the door of virtue in our personal and working lives, we will open the way into a sanctuary of peace for ourselves and for others. We are enabled to lead a unified life with the same values at home and at work, a life that is transparent and has nothing to hide.

Virtue is not sufficient to create sanctuary but it is a

necessary way into it. Benedict is well aware that the doorway of virtue can put people off, so that they never open it and enter. 'Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset' (RB, Prologue: 48). Yes indeed, virtue is a narrow door, but the space beyond that door is infinite – the infinite space of real sanctuary. The sanctuary that you purchase as a holiday or as a therapy comes to an end; the myth of endless consumption is just that: a myth. As we enter sanctuary through virtue rather than by buying our way in, we can choose to leave consumption outside the door. By entering through this door, we can concentrate on creating new and sacred places in the large space that lies beyond consumption. Virtue is the true door into the sanctuary of infinite space.

STEP INSIDE

Having located the doorway, you now need to step into the sanctuary. This is a sanctuary of heart and mind where the normal laws of physics do not apply. You will not discover it all at once because this sanctuary is infinite. So in a moment you will go through the door and take your very first step inside; yet as your foot approaches the floor you will realise that you have to lay down that floor yourself. In the sacred sanctuary God gives you the plan and he shows you how to build it. Nobody can do it for you; each sanctu-

ary is part of the same divine plan and yet each is different, personal to the one who dwells in it. It is unique because the sanctuary-dweller is also the sanctuary-builder.

So I invite you to go through the door and take your first step inside. The floor under your feet is the material that underlies the whole life of the sanctuary. It comprises something that so many people today say they are craving: silence.