

The 'ministry of interruptions'

Do you enjoy being interrupted? Sounds like a silly question doesn't it! No one does I suppose. But for some of us it's harder than others. I'm one of those people who tends to get very focused on the task at hand and so can be quite unaware of what's going on around me. Thus a simple and innocent interruption can come as a huge intrusion into my little world. I apologise to any of you who have experienced this with me, but I also know I'm not the only one!

There are benefits, of course, to being like this. There are times when we need to knuckle-down, focus, and get to work. But if we're always so focused on our *task* that we neglect to notice the *people* who cross our paths, I believe we make a huge mistake, and in fact miss out on God-given opportunities every day. This is something I've needed to learn, and continue to grow in.

It's always fascinated me that in the Greek language there are two distinct words for 'time' which are hard to distinguish in English. First there is 'chronos', which is chronological time. This is time as we most commonly think of it, the time which our clocks keep. But then there is 'kairos', which is more like a 'period' or a 'season', or something like 'the opportune moment' when an event of significance happens. We are using the word 'time' like this when say that 'it was just the right *time* in my life for that to happen'. In the New Testament this 'kairos' time took on special significance as being God's time, that is as the moment in our world when God acts. St Paul says that Christ died 'at the right time (kairos)' Rom 5:3.

I think this understanding of time can help us in thinking about interruptions also. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected in some depth on all this, in a famous little book on Christian community which I've found extremely helpful. His concept has since been called the 'ministry of interruptions'. Here's what he says:

"We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and cancelling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest, perhaps reading the Bible - passed by the man who had fallen among robbers. When we do that, we pass by the visible sign of the Cross raised in our lives to show us that God's way, and not our own, is what counts." Bonhoeffer, Life Together

If you know anything of Bonhoeffer's story, it would be an understatement to say he was a man with much to do. Yet he chose not to see all those people and situations that crossed his path each day as annoying interruptions, but as God-given opportunities. I've found this can work itself out in two different ways.

Firstly it can be for the benefit of others. So for example a person comes across our path at, what for us, is the most inconvenient of times. But for them those few minutes spent listening, talking, and perhaps praying, was exactly what they needed. I was just 'the right person at the right time' at we sometimes say. On the other hand though, I've found it's just as often that these interruptions come as a blessing to me. So I may be struggling with something, or finding it difficult to work through an issue or to articulate a point in something I'm writing, and the unexpected visitor is the one who brings the comfort, stimulation or clarity I need. In either case we miss out if we're too focused on

our other tasks to be present in the moment we're given. In the first case we miss out on an opportunity to give, in the second on an opportunity to receive.

I wonder how the ministry of interruptions could influence our life together here at Bethlehem? I wonder how it could be helpful in your personal life in family, at work, and in various other places we find ourselves? How many times have we missed opportunities for a precious moment with another person in our community because we were too busy ticking the next job off our list? I confess I've made this sort of mistake many times, but by God's grace I will keep learning to be open to the 'ministry of interruptions'.

God bless you, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer