



A Wait Problem

As a society, we Australians are not very good at waiting. Being at the end of a long queue in the supermarket, or at the petrol station, or the ticket office is enough to send us into an agitated frenzy. Trolley rage, road rage, crowded train rage – you name it, we rage about it. Busyness is the new virtue and anyone who is not “flat out”, “head-down, tail-up”, “haven’t got a minute” is obviously not pulling their weight in this country with some of the longest working hours in the world. Last year, a Sydney University study showed that one in five Australian workers puts in at least 50 hours a week while, overall, full-time employees work an average of 44 hours per week, placing us near the top of the hours-worked pile among the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries.

Last year, Australians clocked up over 2 billion hours of unpaid overtime. The situation has reached such a fever pitch of activity that The Australia Institute has nominated November 25th as National Go Home on Time Day www.gohomeontimeday.org.au. Of course, once we get home, there’s very little likelihood that we’ll be any less busy than we are at work as we rush to complete household chores, to fulfil social engagements and family commitments.

Many of the great saints and mystics over the centuries have recognised that being IN the world is to be in a state of constant distraction. Some have chosen to separate themselves from the distractions by seeking out isolated places that were conducive to deep contemplation and union with God. Others have acknowledged that life is full of unavoidable distractions and have worked within the limits. Still others have reminded us that God is always available to us and, equally, that we can make ourselves available to God in very limited time. The fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* author describes the work of contemplation as being “the shortest work that can be imagined”. For him, that “shortest” time was “no longer or shorter than one athomus”. To the medieval understanding an athomus was the smallest quantity of time, indivisible and almost incomprehensible. It was approximately equal to one-sixth of a second and, therefore, the *Cloud* author is speaking of the attainment of God as being virtually instantaneous. It is our modern-day equivalent of finding and experiencing God in the absolute present, in every moment. The *Cloud* author further reminds us that “[we] shall be asked how all the time given [to us] has been spent ... [for] nothing is more precious than time. In one little moment, heaven may be won and lost ... [and] time is made for man, not man for time.” That is, the *Cloud* author stresses the

importance of time, the necessity to use it effectively, and the infinite possibilities that time offers in each and every moment.

As we enter the Advent season, we become very aware of a seasonal reason to be very, very busy: Christmas. There is work to finish before the holiday break, presents to buy, food to prepare, a house to clean and decorate. Paradoxically, however, Advent is that season of “waiting” for the new light and life of the world; a season of anticipation; a time of hopeful wonder; a time to put aside busyness every now and then, if only for an “athomus”. Decide to enjoy a few “present moments”. And, perhaps, when you’re stuck on a supermarket queue – as inevitably you will be at Christmas time – don’t rage. Instead, try taking a deep breath and enjoy waiting in the presence of God.

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