

Bishop Mike Harrison writes:

When the Titanic sank, strange to say that one of the contributing factors was people's busyness.

Apparently less than an hour before the ship collided with the iceberg, the radio operator responded to warnings about ice in the area with "Shut up, shut up. I'm busy".

With lockdown restrictions lifting there's a slow ratcheting up towards the busyness we knew formerly and as the Titanic story suggests, there can be a danger in our busyness, our hurry.

But busyness appears to be on trend these days - if you ask someone "how are you?" one answer you'll pretty frequently get is "busy". Maybe less so in these strange Covid times, but nevertheless, whereas the stock reply might be "fine" or "well", these days the chances are the response may well be some variant on busy.

With lifestyles becoming more 24/7 and few refuges from noise, entertainment and work to insulate us, you can see why we might be perpetually busy. And when we have time, when the work is done and the chores complete, time is still quickly gobbled up – by for example the internet.

And this kind of activity is not innocent, studies noting how our web-browsing and flitting from subject to subject constantly is chipping away capacity for concentration and contemplation.

As for our phones – one recent study found we touch our phones on average 2,617 times a day and the same study found that just being in same room as our phones even if they were turned off, reduced our working memory and problem-solving skills (aka they make us dumber). This kind of busyness doesn't seem to be doing us much good.

More widely FOMO, the fear of missing out, can fuel our busyness as for example when we scroll through twitter and facebook feeds to catch up with what we've missed – part of something called entertainment anxiety – worry that we've missed some kind of entertainment pushing us on.

And this busyness can lead to inexorable hurrying to cram everything in, and signs of hurry sickness include irritability, hypersensitivity, restlessness, workaholism, emotional numbness, lack of care of body, isolation, escapist behaviours, out of order priorities and loss of discipline.

There can also be social pressures not just to be busy but effortlessly fruitful in our busyness. The University of Pennsylvania in the USA made headlines a few years ago when there were an astounding six student suicides in 13 months. The final report from the administration cited something called the "Penn face" – defined as the practice of "acting happy and self-assured even when sad or stressed".

The perception among students appeared to be that one needed to be doing just great academically, socially and otherwise; while effortlessly, fruitfully busy.

What is this about? Well, maybe busyness is serving as a measure of how we're doing, how we're getting on.

Indeed keeping up with the Joneses can mean trying to out schedule them. I have to confess that clergy like me can be as bad as anyone at this – which is disturbing because we should know better – know better than to think who we are amounts to how much we do. But somehow busyness is becoming a metric for our personal success.

Why are we leaning on this idea of busyness to tell us and one another we're okay, our lives matter, we're 'justified'? It's pretty odd when you stop and think about it – but the trouble is we don't take time to stop and think about it much.

One person who did stop and think about it, one of my favourite writers, was Dallas Willard. When he was asked "What do I need to do to become the me I want to be?", he replied "you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life". When the person asked, "and what else?" Willard replied "there is nothing else. Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life"

That's intriguing. And it makes a lot of sense. Think about it, love, insight and peace are all incompatible with hurry – next time you're rushing a spouse, child, relative or neighbour out of the door ask yourself, "is it love I'm feeling? Or peace?"

The Catholic writer Ronald Rolheiser goes so far as to say "pathological busyness, distraction and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives".

So what might we do to resist the kind of hurrying, the busyness that is weakening our relationships and self-destructive? Well there are some pretty classic recommendations from Christian spirituality (and indeed other schools of spirituality) but just to mention three.

First silence and solitude - taking a walk or sitting somewhere peaceful. Turning off our communication and media devices. Stopping doing, producing, pleasing people, entertaining oneself, some way of bringing ourselves back to this moment in all it's sacred simplicity.

Second, practising Sabbath – finding a day each week (or maybe initially a few hours beginning in the evening) – with phones being switched off. In the morning no bed making, no dishwashing, sleeping in – but a good breakfast. Watching a film, going for a walk, out for a meal (with a generous tip so sabbath is a gift for others too), always mindful that this is not about accomplishing anything except entering into peace and rest.

Third, slowing. You know, slowing down your body, slow down your life. Ideas might include keeping within the speed limit, getting in the slow lane, showing up early to meetings, getting in the longest queue, setting times for email, limiting social media, walking slower, cooking, digging, all to be more present.

Anyhow, I must get on...