

# Too little time? Kia Kaha

Hands up who's busy at the moment.

Keep your hands up if you're sick of the ride now and just want to get off.

Being busy. It's source of a lot of stress and exhaustion, but also a badge of honour in our culture.

"Are you busy at the moment?" It's a nice, safe question to ask someone, once you've finished chatting about the weather and whether the All Blacks were lucky to win last night. If you talk to me, I don't even tend to do the All Blacks topic.

The correct answer is, of course, Yes! Yes we are busy at the moment. It's a nice thing to be busy. it means job security and safe income.

But is busyness in itself a good thing?

Before I start though, cards on table I'm the worst person to be offering any advice on this topic. I seem to have been racing around like a headless chook since about June. I very nearly didn't get this sermon written because it was hard to find the time to actually sit down and do it. How's that for some awesome irony?

Let's find out together!

Not just me - EVERYONE is busy.

I wanted a bit of a gauge on how busy we all are, so I sent out my roving reporter Lucy to find out:

*"Thanks Dad*

*So I've be doing some investigating. And yeah we are all busy.*

*Our family is busy. Our Thursday actually has to start on Wednesday with making an on-the-go tea. 6:30am we are all up to rush into the car by 7:30am. Mum's at work by 8:30am and us kids dropped at school. Dad's at a meeting, then off to work at 9:30am. Guitar lesson starts 3:40pm ends 4:10pm and then we pick up Mum, eat dinner and arrive at Saxton for athletics at 5:30pm then at 7:00pm we get into the car and drive home. Then we have to make our lunches and get already to do it all over again*

*So we're busy but we are a family. They're always busy right?*

*Well what about kids? Surely kids have all the time in the world don't they? Well my friend at school has marimba at morning tea, concert band at lunch, volleyball after school a quick dinner and*

*then off to orchestra. Every bit of her spare time is taken up. Well I guess kids are quite busy. With all the extra curricular activities invites on top of school.*

*But what about retired people? Surely they aren't busy. They don't even have to work. They of all people must be able to sit back and relax. So I rang Dave. Who at the time was actually to busy to talk to me. When I later... what was the word he used? ...interrogated him. He told me had be doing viticulture which is a constant thing, he had someone staying and a finance team meeting.*

*So yeah Dad **everyone** is busy."*

I'm going to go out on a limb today and suggest that ultra busyness is bad.

It's bad for us, and it's bad for the other people in our lives. I'm not talking about those little bursts of busyness that last a week or two then you get over thm with a sigh of relief. I'm talking about busyness as the norm, busyness as a lifestyle and busyness as a sign of success.

There are some downsides to being constantly busy. This is my list sorted by increasing severity:

1. Feeling a bit stressed
2. Forgetting things
3. Grumpiness
4. Missing out on something because you have other things to get done
5. Lack of spontaneity
6. Feeling utterly, bones deep, tired
7. Shallow relationships - they take time to develop
8. Feelings of failure and desperation
9. Self destructive coping mechanisms
10. Burnout

At its horrific extreme it can add one more data point to New Zealand's terrible suicide statistics.

Why are we so busy? What keeps us loading up our plates?

There are many factors. I think these are the most influential

## **1. Fear of missing out or "that sounds fun!"**

This is a big one for me. Being involved in stuff is fun. It's tempting to look at each opportunity in isolation and I often find myself thinking "I can do that" or "how hard can it be?"

## 2. Capable people get asked to do lots of things

It's a simple equation - If you're good at getting things done, people ask you to do things. It's hard to say "no" without feeling like you're leaving people in the lurch or feeling guilty. I fall for this one too. Just because we'd be good at doing something, doesn't mean we're the best person to do that particular job. And I can think of a bunch of highly capable people in this church and how busy they are.

## 3. Our society highly values "successful people"

As a parent, it's tempting to get our kids involved in lots of things, either to give them a broad experience base or give them an edge against their peers. Schools too have incentive programmes designed to hook kids into doing a broad range of activities. And this is generally a good thing. It is good to try out lots of new things.

It's just that a kind of arms race has started, and sometimes it seems like a game of "they with the busiest kids win".

And for us adults, particularly those on salaries how much pressure is there to work overtime to just solve that one problem before whatever is due out tomorrow? Does our next promotion depend on how willing we are to spend our own time to make our organisation more successful? It'll be the same again tomorrow by the way...

## 4. The Protestant work ethic

A bit of a weird one this, but it actually drives our attitudes to work, money and laziness in this country.

It's an idea that grew out of Calvinism in the 16th Century. It was decided that hard work, discipline and frugality are the outward signs of a person's faith. This was in contrast to the more Catholic idea that religious attendance, confession, and adherence to the sacraments were the outward signs of a strong faith.

This meme has spread, and has considerably influenced many Western European cultures. Think: Switzerland, Germany, The Netherlands, Scandinavia and the UK. The Puritan settlers carried it across the Atlantic to the fledgling United States, and the Victorians brought it to New Zealand.

So now we have the absurd idea that good Christians are supposed to be constantly busy, or be seen as somehow lazy or slothful. How on Earth did our success in following the teachings of Jesus become intertwined with working ourselves into an early grave?

The dangers of over-work and burnout, problems we think of as so modern, have been around since at least the Bronze Age. I have evidence in our first reading this morning, It's from Exodus 18:13-27.

This story isn't in the lectionary, so we may not have heard it very often. But it's quite interesting eh?

Moses had fallen into one of our traps from earlier. He was one of those people that's so capable and on to it, that he had worked himself into a position of being indispensable. He had to make all the legal calls, he had to sort out disputes, he had to set the spiritual direction, he had to decide moral conundrums and pass on the will of God to whoever needed it. Makes me tired just thinking of it.

You do sometimes find CEOs or school headmasters who are micro-managers, wanting to be personally involved in every decision. Sometimes it all about being in control, but mostly it's more about wanting to make the right decisions and support those working under them. But no matter how noble your intentions, you can't keep that sort of behaviour up for too long. Even if you're Moses!

Our pew bibles say that the job was too much for him. Some other translations have his father-in-law calling the job too heavy for him. Tuck that word "heavy" away because we'll come back to it.

I find it interesting that it was Moses's father-in-law that tackled him about it. Our nearest and dearest are so often the people who know when we're struggling to keep life from bulging out around the edges. They're the ones who cop it when we're tired and grumpy. And they're the ones who miss out on our time and attention while we're pouring it into something else.

Thank God for Moses's father-in-law!

The solution was to spread the load. Moses chose a group of trustworthy people - honest, incorruptible and God-fearing. The sort of people who will put the fair treatment of others before personal gain. Those people became judges, and it was only a particularly knotty problem that found its way up to Moses. Otherwise things ticked along, freeing Moses up to intercede with God on behalf of Israel, teach the people and train up the judges and to finally have some time to work on his bonsai trees or whatever he enjoyed doing with his spare time.

Moses DID have to give up some of his control. Some of the appointed judges probably didn't go about things in the same way as Moses would have, but that's actually OK, once you're prepared to loosen your grip slightly.

Over this sermon series the issue of busyness and overwork has been a recurring theme. Susan raised it at our latest combined service, including a challenge to our Parish from Kevin and Anne that we would need to find a way to reduce our collective busyness.

Owen raised it again in his sermon on rhythm and routine.

My friend, the Rev Spanky Moore once commented that the church seems determined to be counter-cultural in a series of increasingly irrelevant ways.

I think fighting against the busyness IS counter-cultural, but I think also it's counter cultural in a good way because it's all about loving our neighbour, and it ties in so closely with the way Jesus operated.

This brings us to our second reading. It's short and sharp and it's from Matthew 11:28-30

Before I go on any further, can I just ask you to pause and think about that little reading.

I'm of the opinion that one of the most beautiful and meaningful things you can say to someone who's under pressure is "Here, let me do that bit..."

This message from Jesus is a similar sentiment and I just find it incredibly beautiful.

In contrast to our society and flying in the face of our protestant work ethic, being busy is not an important aspect of our faith!

Being busy actually has a detrimental effect on our relationships with others and with God. It stops us from seeing the needs of people right under our noses, even as we work furiously away.

In 2010, an Anglican Priest called Peter Owen Jones undertook on an interesting experiment. He saw people rushing around on what he called the 'endless treadmill of buying and spending. Always searching for that little thing called "more".'



He decided to follow the rule of St Francis and forgo money and live for a year in a state of voluntary poverty.

For a while this was a huge hoot for his parishioners as the vicar came around to do some odd-jobs in return for putting some petrol in his car, or in exchange for some of their home-made jam. He washed dishes in the pub, in return for food and to take the scraps home for his chickens. And, in a rural community, people generously supplied him with veges from their gardens, and meat from their freezers. And Peter found there were times where he was able to talk and connect with people at a slightly deeper level than he had before...

...but somehow it didn't quite feel like enough.

Speaking to an actual Franciscan monk, he was told in no uncertain terms that living in poverty isn't the same

thing as self-sufficiency. If he wanted to follow the rule of St Francis, he was going to have to go deeper - right out above his head. So he decided to take a four week journey across Southern England, without accommodation, food or money. Instead he was going to have to rely on the generosity of strangers.

It was hard.

It was really hard.

He described it as a process of being gradually broken down. Begging for food outside a supermarket is certainly not a place most of us want to go, but that's exactly what happened to Peter Owen Jones. Accommodation was the hardest thing. People are understandably reluctant to allow some random stranger into their homes.

But through it all, he did gradually find some incredibly deep connections with people. Sometimes it was small things like the smiles on the faces of the people who bought him a block of cheese or a bunch of bananas from the supermarket - he had given them an opportunity to be generous. Something he had denied people when he was being self-sufficient.

Sometimes it was big connections like the man who was facing a huge upheaval in his life, and tracked Peter down to pray with him. Peter eventually spent the whole afternoon and evening with the guy and was able to talk to him about what was burdening him.

Or the Muslim family that took Peter in because he was a pilgrim, and as such a sacred traveller. He was shown incredible hospitality and they were able to talk and share with each other about how they saw God in everyday life.

The experiment eventually broke down when Peter's car broke down. He reluctantly had to open his wallet and pay some serious bills, but it left him with a powerful sense of how precious life really is. He went eight months without money and he loved it.

Without money, and being part of the rat-race he found there were some changes to his outlook. He felt more connected with the land and the people around him. He got over his reluctance to share his needs with people. He experienced generosity and found pleasure in both accepting that generosity, and treating everyone with the same generous heart. He discovered the preciousness of time and sharing that with those around him. When you're living in poverty the only thing you have left to offer people is your time. And for a time-starved culture it is a costly and valuable gift!

Off the back of his experiment, Peter Owen Jones decided to rearrange his job. He freed space to visit people and pray with them in a way he couldn't have done before. He started a series of Christmas services aimed at rush-hour commuters where people could pull out of the traffic and have space to just sit and quietly reflect. And he

continues to try and bring serenity, time and simplicity to his ministry and the parishes he looks after. Life is such a precious gift from God, and we shouldn't waste it!

I think Micah is onto a good thing with his Taize services. He's providing that counter-cultural space to just sit in the quiet, allowing God to speak to you and to have your burden lifted (at least for an hour or so). Please make sure you get information about them to anyone who needs it, and maybe try and pop along yourself every now and then. It can be a powerful experience!

It has often struck me how often in the Gospel readings Jesus and his disciples aren't doing anything particularly much. They're just hanging around in the synagogue or in this town or that place and things come and find them there. Jesus had time to respond in the most appropriate way to people like Nicodemus, or the Samrian women at the well. He could decide to stay with Zaccheaus, or to drop in on Mary, Martha and Lazerus. He couldn't have done that if he was rushing from task to task, ticking things of his to-do list, or holding down a lucrative job.

People came to Jesus and he spent time with them. He refocussed them onto what really mattered, or healed their bodies and minds.

That doesn't sound like me, or many other people I know. Stopping and spending spontaneous time can be a bit of a luxury I can't afford.

Is it possible that we all have things backwards, and that we have lost our way?

Ken Morgan is an Anglican priest in Melbourne who is concerned with how much work churches, particularly small churches are doing. He sees the job of the church as discipleship, and when he asked churches what they were doing that stopped them from discipling, two things came back. Fellowship and fundraising. Ken says "Fundraising paints you into a corner. I call it sausage sizzling ourselves to death". He's seen churches running fetes that take half a year to plan and only raise a few thousand dollars.

We're actually not too bad at this. There are a lot of events and activities happening in this church that are directly aimed at connecting with our community. But the danger is always there. Especially with the new building coming online - as exciting as it is.

Are we brave enough to take on a Jethro role and gently let others know that they are too busy and what they are carrying is too heavy?

Can we help to find creative solutions to lighten the load?

Are we prepared to be humble in heart and accept that advice?

I don't know how I would answer those questions myself. I'm a fine one to talk - as I said earlier, I struggle with this stuff every day.

And it's a whole different level when we're working as a group. How would it change vestry meetings, for example, if we were keeping an eye out on how busy the Parish is getting, and for what purpose. What would happen if we had something like a quota system to measure Parish activity against?

This stuff is hard, and leads to difficult decisions. But with God's help I'm going to try and simplify my life a bit. I'm going to try and drop some of my commitments, and I'm going to add my voice to the growing group of people who are starting to seriously question how much we are all doing. It's going to be hard, but I'm going to do it. I'm also challenging you to do the same!

## **A prayer**

Slow me down, Lord, Slow me down!  
Ease the pounding of my heart  
By the quieting of my mind.

Give me amid the confusion of my day  
The calmness of the everlasting hills.  
Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles  
With soothing music of the singing stream.  
Help me to know the magical restoring power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute holidays,  
Of slowing down to look at a flower,  
To chat with a friend, to pat a dog,  
To read a few lines from a good book.

Let me look upward at the mighty kahikatea  
And know that it is great and strong  
because it grew slowly and well.  
There is more to life than increasing speed.

Slow me down, Lord, and inspire me  
To send my roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values  
That I may grow towards the stars of my great destiny

Amen