

Making Space

The world is a busy, crowded place, full of distractions and noise. We are surrounded by examples of how people are trying to find space, whether to remove distractions and focus on what is important or just to recharge. As part of this trend, mindfulness, meditation, reflection and prayer have all become more popular. In a recent report, the share of internet searches for prayer increased by 50% as the world wrestled with the fears of Covid-19 and the new reality of lockdown.

I recall seeing how some of the most impactful adverts in magazines and newspapers have minimal text. Clever designers buy up space in publications around their adverts and leave it blank, removing the clutter and noise surrounding them, drawing the attention of the reader to their key message. An advertising agency 'Wunder' in Canada took this to another level last Christmas when they bought prime advertising billboards and even a full-page newspaper advert and, rather than plaster advertising messaging across the spaces, they left them entirely blank. The campaign dubbed 'White Christmas' arguably got more attention than the adverts that bombarded us and was received positively. The contrast with the surroundings was striking.

This resonated with me on a number of levels. Lockdown has brought huge fear, uncertainty and enforced change to our lives. Countless people are suffering hardship, loneliness and isolation and I am certainly not seeking to ignore or downplay this pain. However, it has served to challenge some of the noise and peri-pheral distractions around us, giving a little more opportunity, a little more time to focus on things in life that actually matter to us. For many, it may have been the comfort of family contact whether by letter or video calls, or perhaps the natural world, wildlife and creation. It could be the beauty or company of birds feeding in our gardens, flowers or calming greenery around us. It could be acts of kindness from neighbours or strangers, or anything else that is important and comforting to you.

I am reminded of the times Jesus sought refuge in solitude at various times through the Gospels, away from the general din of everyday life, to reconnect, refresh or strengthen Himself and His relationship with the Father. This was whether it was as a way to prepare for His future ministry when He entered the wilderness for 40 days or before calling the disciples when He spent a night alone in prayer. Or when grieving, hearing the news of John the Baptist's death, Jesus withdrew in a boat to a desolate place by Himself. In times of distress and foreboding, Jesus sought quiet time alone to pray, such as in the hours before His arrest, He went to the Mount of Olives.

Solitude or time for reflection is not always a negative, but can be a counterbalance to the noise and stimuli we can be overwhelmed by. We need to have both and to recognise and give thanks for both. Without the valleys there would be no mountains. Without the storm there would be no calm as a contrast. Without pauses, conversation would be just noise.

Perhaps, as the traffic on the streets and noise in our lives starts to return, we can still retain some of the more positive insights and changes from our own times of solitude or quiet. I pray that, as life returns to a new normal, whatever that may be, we all have the opportunity and time for both companionship and fellowship, but also quiet time to reflect.

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