

Testimony

1974 was the year I left school and started work. It was also the year when Country and Western singer Mac Davis wrote and recorded the song “Stop and smell the roses.” It was an instant hit and gave him his second number 1.

It begins:

Hey! Mister!
Where you going in such a hurry?
Don't you think it's time you realized
There's a whole lot more to life than work and worry?
The sweetest things in life are free
And they're right before your eyes.

The chorus goes like this:

You got to Stop and Smell the roses;
You've got to count your many blessings everyday;
You're gonna find your way to heaven is a rough and rocky road
If you don't Stop and Smell the roses along the way.



It is such sound advice that it has found its way into our everyday language as a piece of advice to those who are in danger of forgetting what really matters in life. With the benefit of technology tasks that once took hours now only take minutes. Once, if you ordered anything through the post, the small print always said “please allow 28 days for delivery”. Now it’s “order before 1pm and we’ll send it the same day”. I am convinced it won’t be long before somebody works out how to send your goods to you half an hour before you think about ordering them. We crave instant coffee, favour quick drying paint and buy three-minute-meals.

Thanks to all this we ought to have a lot more time on our hands, so what do we do with it? The truth is we fill it up with all kinds of other busy-ness, we rush from one appointment to another and we parade this frenetic action as a virtue. “He is such a hard worker!” we are always trying to acquire more and more “stuff”, and whether we need it or not, we want it, and we convince ourselves that the priority is to work and work so that we can buy and buy. The result is we don’t have time to build relationships, we don’t have time to appreciate the everyday beauty around us we don’t even have time to rest properly and just do nothing. It is little wonder that our society is littered with broken families and physically and emotionally exhausted people.

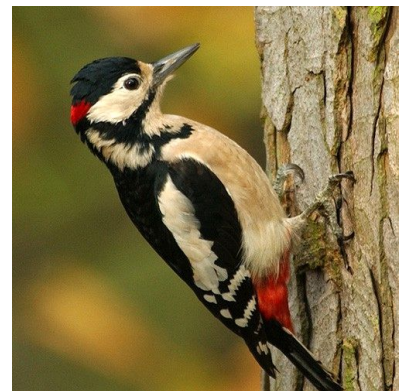
In saying all this I do not speak from the moral high ground. Quite the opposite! I have been a Christian preacher for nearly four decades, and I could not tell you how many times I have gone into a pulpit and said something like this: “You don’t have to make God love you. He loves you whatever you do. You don’t have to buy his favour”. The last time was only a couple of weeks ago. Fundamental to our Evangelical Christian Doctrine is the teaching that we are

saved by grace. That means that our hope for the future, whatever shape that hope takes, is based upon the love that God has for us, and his knowledge of our limitations and weaknesses. In no way is God's opinion of us based on how much we achieve or how busy we make ourselves. With all my heart I believe that, and yet I was living as if I didn't – as if being busy was a virtue. I was getting up each morning, rushing around doing things that I thought people expected me to do and taking a self-righteous pride in the fact that I had more untaken days off and holidays than any of my colleagues; all the time hoping that God was noticing what a superb chap I was and how much he was relying on me. All the time I did not realise that I was getting more and more tired, and that my faith was becoming stale, and I was starting to harbour resentful and ungracious thoughts.



Then on the morning of 19th April God touched me on the shoulder and said, "Peter, it's time to stop and smell the roses!" That is not how I saw it at the time. I laid in bed with my mind in absolute turmoil. I could not bring to mind what I was supposed to do, which at that point was get out of bed, have a shower and get dressed. I had literally burned myself out and collapsed in total exhaustion. I felt remote from reality and remote from God and I began to panic. The panic attack lasted a few minutes or an hour, I don't know, but somehow I managed to telephone a friend who came to help me and took charge until my wife was able to get home from work. That was the first day of two months off work.

After a couple of weeks' complete rest, I began to feel better. Just around breakfast time a pair of Bullfinches came every day to feed at our bird feeding station. They were joined by a pair of Greenfinches and a group of Chaffinches, one of whom started coming right up to the windowsill and tapping on the window. I pretended it was to get my attention. One very special day, a Woodpecker came, and Blue, Coal and Great Tits were regular visitors. I was struck by the sheer beauty of these creatures which had passed me by before. I took to opening the window and listening to their song instead of watching the TV. The verse about God looking after the sparrows came to mind – it was as if God said to me "Here I am!"



I found time to tidy the garden and as I was pulling up the weeds and getting cross about the fact that my flowerbeds were completely weed free last autumn, I suddenly thought what a wonderful miracle happens each year as new plants sprout and grow. I got very excited one morning when I noticed that a plant which I thought had died over winter, a campanula, had some green shoots. As I write this that plant is about to flower. The same thing happened last year and the year before but for some reason it didn't strike me as so wonderful then. The verse about seed time and harvest came to mind and it was as if God said to me, "I'm here as well!"

When I began my return to work, I was a bit afraid of meeting people for the first time, but when I did I was so overwhelmed by the love and care and understanding with which

everyone I met treated me. I felt privileged and honoured to have been in the thoughts and prayers of so many people. Everyone told me how glad they were to see me, and I could see in their eyes that they meant it. The words of Jesus about how the world will know we belong to him through the love we show each other came to mind, and God seemed to say to me “I am here too, I’m loving you through these my people.”

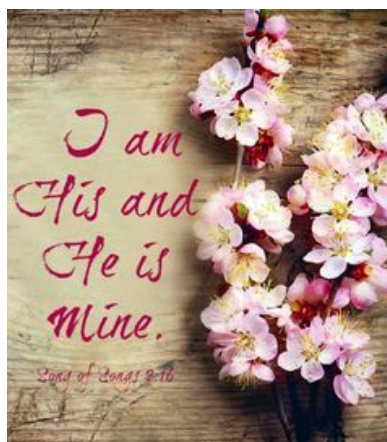
I could say a lot more but it is enough just to say thank you to God for renewing my sense of his presence and call upon my life by simply giving me time to stop and smell the roses, because what he really said was stop trying to find me through all the activity and busy-ness of your life, just open your eyes and you’ll see I never left you.

I share all this in the hope that if anyone is feeling anxious, or under pressure, either from church or from work, then you might just be encouraged to stop and smell the roses. If you do you will discover that what matters to God is you, not what you do or what you achieve.

God bless you.



Rev. Peter Cross



Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o’erflow,
Flow’rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.

- George Wade Robinson