

## Introduction

# REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ORDINARY

### The Bright Field

*I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

R. S. Thomas

## Where has Ordinary gone?

Ordinary is out of fashion; so much so, in fact, that calling something ‘ordinary’ suggests that it is somehow substandard, disappointing and certainly lacklustre. We might say that the food in a certain restaurant is ‘ordinary’; that the clothes we have on are just something ‘ordinary’; or of a football team that their performance was ‘ordinary’. What we mean by this is that the food in the restaurant doesn’t live up to our expectations, that our outfit is nothing special or that the football team could have done better. Describing something as ordinary isn’t quite an insult but it certainly isn’t a compliment. This dissatisfaction with ordinariness is, perhaps, summed up in the inspection of schools, where a school inspector can deem the institution to be excellent, good, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Anyone in education will tell you that it is not satisfactory to be deemed satisfactory. In other words, ordinary is simply not good enough.

On one level I relate to this entirely. There is something vitally important about aiming for excellence in all that we do. The only adequate response to the God of infinite care and generosity is, in our finite way, to meet his extravagance with the very best of who we are and what we have. The pursuit of our own excellence (not in comparison with others but simply the best we can do) is surely the human vocation in response to God’s great goodness.

Nevertheless, you can’t help wondering whether our desire for excellence has got out of control and has, in some ways, become a monster that consumes us rather than a natural response to God’s goodness. In marketing, things are constantly branded as ‘all new’, ‘best ever’ or ‘20% bigger’, as though we simply cannot buy something unless it is demonstrably better, bigger and more attract-

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ive than before. Our expectations these days are constantly angled towards the expectation that whatever we do today will be more exciting and more satisfying than yesterday. It sometimes causes me to pause in the supermarket, with my hand hovering over the hand wash (or other similar substance) and to wonder whether I really need it to be better and more exciting than my previous one. Since my old hand wash washed my hands, made them smell nice, moisturized AND killed all the bacteria, is there anything more left for this new improved, all new recipe, 50% bigger hand wash to achieve?

The time when this really rankles with me is in coffee shops. I can't drink a lot of coffee so would prefer to have a 'regular' or even, shocking as though this might sound, a 'small' cup of coffee. This, however, is not vouchsafed in most large chain coffee shops where your choice begins with 'tall' and moves upwards from there. Starbucks, I read, has now even introduced a fourth size of coffee in the USA, called the Trente, which contains 31 ounces or 916 ml of liquid, in other words 16 ml bigger than the average human stomach. Where, I wonder, can we go from here? What happens when 'bigger and better' becomes either unfeasible or undesirable?

Ordinary, it seems, is no longer. We now move ever onwards from big to bigger, from good to better, from exciting to more exciting. Ordinary is dull, unsatisfactory and to be avoided at all costs.

### **Why Ordinariness is essential**

It is easy to parody this kind of attitude but it has a grip on us that it makes it hard for us to escape, even in church. The major Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter have always, and rightly, been occasions of much focus and celebration within the church. The

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problem is not our celebration of major festivals, nor even particular times leading up to them such as Advent and Lent. The problem is what we do in between. What do we do on 'ordinary' days, whether they be Sundays or any other day of the week? What do we do on days that aren't special?

It is tempting either to focus entirely on the special days so that we wish the days away until those special days come round again or to attempt to make every day special so that there are no ordinary days left. Neither helps us to get in touch with ordinariness. In my view ordinariness is essential to our well-being as people and a vital part of our life in Christ. We need the ordinary in order to help us fully to encounter the extraordinary. It would be impossible to appreciate the light in a painting without any less bright shades. If it really were Christmas every day, as the song written by the glam-rock band Wizzard wishes with such fervour, then Christmas itself would lose its appeal let alone its meaning. Almost by definition, if things are special all the time they become the new ordinary and we then need to think up ever grander ways of being special. Ordinariness is the canvas against which we can appreciate the special and it helps us to appreciate much more deeply the meaning of days, events or moments that are extraordinary.

Even more than this, however, ordinariness is the very essence of existence. We live the vast majority of our time in ordinariness. It is hard to make brushing your teeth, washing up or going to work every day glamorous, largely because they are not. They are the stuff of everyday living. They aren't exciting but they are necessary. Our daily existence is one of ordinariness and we doom ourselves to a life of dissatisfaction and disappointment if we cannot find some way of living contentedly with the everyday.

### Seeing where the treasure lies

As with so many things, the quality of the lives we live is shaped not so much by *what* we do but by *how* we do it. It is so easy to trudge through life, simply missing the gems and wonder of everyday existence, not because they are absent but because we don't notice them. I remember an occasion when my daughters were small, when one of them squealed in ecstasy, saying, 'Look, Mummy, look.' I looked and what I saw was a somewhat grubby patch of grass – with rather more mud than makes a parent, who has to do the washing, happy – which was dotted with a few, to my eye, miserable looking daisies. She hopped out of the pushchair and rushed over to them, and crouched down as low as she could get. 'Look,' she said, 'they've got pink edges right on the end, and the petals are like a fan and the yellow bit is all furry.'

She was, of course, right, as anyone who has examined a daisy up close will tell you. What she was even more right about was that the somewhat ordinary muddy patch of grass held a treasure which I had completely overlooked. This is expressed much better than I could ever do by Saunders Lewis in his poem 'A Daisy in April'

Yesterday I saw a daisy  
 Like a shining mirror of the dawn.  
 The day before I walked over it without thought.  
 Yesterday I saw.

This is also one of the themes that R. S. Thomas was exploring in his poem, 'The Bright Field' (on page 1). The poem recalls Thomas's experience of seeing sunlight breaking through onto a field but only subsequently realizing that the field contained the treasure for which he yearned, so constrained was he by hurrying onwards to

a ‘receding future’ or ‘hankering after an imagined past’. We might add to this list looking upwards to heaven (or our modern equivalent) and waiting for a grand divine display of magnificence. What R. S. Thomas is reflecting on is that we all too easily hurry past the pearls of great price that lie along our way because we simply don’t recognize them for what they are. Our vision remains so dazzled by an imagined future glory or a rose-tinted memory of the past that we fail to notice what lies before our very eyes.

One of the great dangers of becoming too sucked into a culture that glories in everything new, bigger and better is that it can – indeed it seeks to – take the shine away from what we already have. If ‘special’ is what we aim for, then by extension ‘ordinary’ is disappointing. The problem with this is that sometimes – often in fact – the special is embedded deep within the ordinary but it takes a well-trained eye to notice it.

## Ordinary Time

For churches that use the lectionary, the problem of what we do with ordinariness becomes focused in what is now often called Ordinary Time. The problem is not unique, however, to churches which use the lectionary. All churches face the challenge of what to do, week after week, month after month in ordinary services when nothing particularly ‘special’ happens. Even if you happen to attend a church which manages to feel special every week of the year, the question remains of what you do in between, during the week, on a Monday morning, perhaps, in the middle of winter or Tuesday afternoon during a damp rainy summer. The liturgical season of Ordinary Time simply shines a spotlight on an experience that we all have at some point in our Christian life, when follow-

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ing Jesus becomes a part of the everyday routine of our daily lives.

The term Ordinary Time is used to refer to a stretch of Sundays between the major seasons. There are two sections of Ordinary Time in the Church's calendar: one, a shorter one, falls between Epiphany and the start of Lent and another, a longer one, between Pentecost and the start of Advent. How long each is, depends on when Easter is. If Easter is very early then there is hardly any Ordinary Time before Lent and there is, consequently, a very long time of Ordinary Time between Pentecost and Advent. In those churches which use lectionaries, I often hear people sigh with slight despondency about 'Ordinary Time', especially during the long period that stretches across the summer months. It can feel a little as though we are faced with a long stretch of not very much; a slightly bland, unexciting series of Sundays with little particular focus or indeed much to recommend them.

There is a certain irony in the recognition that the term 'Ordinary Time' is not a historic one but comes from the liturgical revisions of Vatican Two in 1969. So the churches began calling thirty-three or thirty-four weeks of the year 'ordinary' just at the time when ordinariness was beginning to go out of fashion and was replaced by an increasing emphasis on the new and exciting. We should note, however, that the meaning of the word 'ordinary' in this instance is not 'commonplace or everyday' but 'measured'. The Latin term '*tempus ordinarium*' from which we get the English term 'Ordinary Time' means literally measured time and refers to the numbering of the weeks through a given period of time: 'the first Sunday after ... the second Sunday after' ... and so on.

## In step with the rhythms of life

Ordinary Time has within it an expectation of rhythm, of the measured passing of time. This implies that Ordinary Time is not just to be endured or ignored while it slips dully away but to be noted, noticed and numbered. The rhythmic marking of the first week, second week, third week and so on, allows us not just to let time slip through our fingers but to remember it, to cherish it and to mark the span from the previous week to the following week. It is so easy with all the pressures of everyday life to let hours slip into days, days into weeks, and weeks into months, until years if not decades have passed while we barely notice.

A commitment to Ordinary Time, then, is a commitment to time itself, to the marking off of days and weeks, not so that we can wish them away but so that we can savour them. Ordinary Time challenges us to become 'measured people', people who commit themselves to a greater spaciousness of living and to a less frenetic mode of being. It invites us to be more generous to ourselves and to re-interrogate the rhythms of our life to ensure that our ordinary lives contain enough space within them for us to flourish.

As we mark week after week, we are challenged to celebrate the good times and grieve for the bad, to recall our joys and confess our failings. This rhythmic passing of time is one which the monastic tradition understands profoundly. The monastic life of regular prayer and worship, often in places of outstanding natural beauty is, as Esther de Waal notes in her book *The Spiritual Journey*, designed to help anyone 'become more conscious of the sacredness of time and place' (E. de Waal, *The Spiritual Journey*, St Bede's Publications, 1993, p. 49). In other words the monastic life draws people deeply into ordin-

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ariness though the passing of time in a particular place and it is in that ordinariness that they encounter God.

Many people today are beginning to rediscover the value of monastic living, whether through its traditional forms or through 'new monasticism' which seeks to use the insights of the monastic tradition both in modern day communities and in everyday life. One of the aims of new monasticism is to take the principles of monastic living and to make it applicable to modern life. Even so the particular principles that arise in monasticism are not for everyone. The challenge for each one of us is to find a rhythm that works with our personality, our home life and our working pattern.

One of the complexities of this is that, when you have found the rhythm that works for you and you have done it for long enough, then the rhythm carries you. I have often heard the people who say Morning and Evening prayer regularly, reflect on the fact that no matter how bad your day is, how unprepared for worship you are, how distracted you are by the many competing demands of life, the service itself carries you along. It is a little like steering into the current of a river. Once there the rhythm does the rest, pulling you closer and deeper into the presence of God. The problem is getting into the rhythm in the first place. It takes discipline, practice and sometimes pure grim determination to get over the hump of boredom, distraction and busyness into the rhythm beyond.

### **Finding the rhythm of your own soul**

For some, saying some form of daily office allows them easy access to the deep rhythm of the soul. There are a wide number to choose from, ranging from those that have arisen from particular monastic communities like *Celebrating Common Prayer* from the Anglican Franciscans

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(Continuum, 2003), or *Celtic Daily Prayer* from the Northumbrian Community (Collins, 2005) to those that are more denominationally focused like the Church of England's Morning, Evening or Mid-Day prayer (now available online and in a beautifully produced soft leather binding called *Time to Pray*) or the Jesuit podcast *Pray as you Go*, which can be downloaded to an iPod or MP3 player.

For others the rhythm takes the form of daily Bible study (with or without notes), or weekly prayer groups or Bible studies, or meditation alone or in a group. The list could go on and on. The form that the rhythm could take is almost limitless, the challenge that we each face is simply finding out what the rhythm of our own soul is at any one point in our life.

I learnt this lesson (again!) when my children were smaller. The two most influential rhythms in my spiritual life before I had children were daily reading of the Bible (or to be more honest aiming for daily and hitting a few times a week) and the saying of Morning or Evening prayer. Both of these went out of the window when I had children. Neither fitted easily into my life and I got to the stage of assuming that I had to give up on spirituality for a while until the children grew up.

If I'm honest this wasn't a new struggle, simply a new form of the old one. I've always struggled with praying. The problem is that I'm an extrovert. My best thoughts come when other people are around. I think out loud. I'm closest to God when I'm doing something with my hands. Over the years people have suggested to me that I go on silent retreat to deepen my spirituality. I've learnt through bitter experience that this is a path of unremitting torture. When I do go on silent retreat, I get depressed and obsessed with my own inability to pray alone. Rather than bringing me closer to God it alienates me from

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myself ... and so I've given up trying. I deeply respect – still even envy – those who can pray alone for hours on end, who enjoy silent retreats and need time by themselves to be with God but have given up beating myself up (most of the time at any rate) about the fact that I can't do it myself.

Given this aspect of my personality and the stage that we had reached in our family life, it is hardly surprising that all sense of rhythm, prayer and spirituality went down the tubes until I realized that I was looking at it the wrong way around. Instead, with the help of a wise and wonderful friend, I began to work out what my own deep rhythms were, or to put it another way where I felt closest to God. Very much to my surprise, I discovered that I did have my own deep rhythms; they were just not what I thought they should be. The time when God draws closest in my life is ordinary times: when I'm spending time with my family; when I'm digging, planting and harvesting on the allotment; when I'm making things; when I'm reading and writing. My life, I discovered, was packed with deep rhythms of the soul, I just hadn't allowed them to be counted as such.

Without these times my life grows thin and my inner reservoir runs dry. The challenge for me is to make these my 'ordinary time', the measured, rhythm of life in which I expect to – and often do – meet God. These are the places in the river to which I must learn to return again and again, until the undercurrent lifts me up and draws me along. They are my 'ordinary time' but that does not mean that they will be – or indeed should be – everyone's. Many Christians need silence and aloneness, just as I need noise and company. The key is to find what yours is, and then to find its rhythm.

This also does not mean I never read the Bible (I am a writer and lecturer in the Bible after all!), nor that I don't

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relish church services, but that for now, for me, at this particular stage of my life my rhythm of prayer takes an unusual but rich expression. I have no doubt that it will change in the future, and when it does I will almost certainly need to learn the lesson all over again, but for now I have a rhythm that works (except for when it doesn't).

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As I reflected on my slow realization about where my own particular rhythm is to be found, I have been intrigued by my own assumptions. I think I assumed that I couldn't be praying when digging or playing or cooking because it wasn't 'sacred' enough, not sufficiently set apart to be holy. This seems to be implied in the following quote from Joni Eareckson Tada's book *Heaven: Your Real Home* (Zondervan, 1995):

Few are skilled at holding themselves in a state of listening to heaven's music. Ordinary Things – like kitchen pots clattering, telephones ringing and TV commercials about frozen food and dishwashing detergent – drown out the song.

While I know what she is saying here, I disagree with how she expresses it. For me, the point is that heaven's song sings just as vibrantly in and through the kitchen pots clattering and the telephones ringing but, like R. S. Thomas observed in 'The Bright Field', we go on our way looking for something else, or, as I did, we assume that heaven's song cannot be found there and so look elsewhere. Our natural instinct follows that of Peter on the mountain of transfiguration who wanted to build 'special' dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah to mark the importance of the event. We want to preserve the moment,

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set it apart and make it holy. To do this we build fine buildings, paint exquisite art, sing powerful and stirring music and go aside from our daily lives into silence and contemplation or Bible study and prayer groups. All of this is the proper response to an encounter with the one who created the world, who sits in splendour upon a heavenly throne, who has redeemed the world and will come again in glory. It is a good instinct in that it recognizes the sacredness of our encounters with God and sets apart times and spaces in which we can remind ourselves of God's extraordinariness. However, we need to guard against the assumption that God can only be found in sacred spaces and at sacred times.

The God who was properly worshipped in the majesty and wonder of the temple in Israel, was also the God who yearned for humble, contrite hearts. As Isaiah 57.17 reminds us, God dwells in the lofty places and with those ordinary, everyday people who respond to him genuinely. The God whose temple was gilded with gold, was also the God who cherished the two small copper coins of the widow in Luke 21.1-4. The God whose throne is in heaven, is also the God whose son was laid in a feeding trough and who lived in the hill country of Galilee. God is indeed a Sunday (or Saturday) best God but he is also an everyday God and is as much to be found with those washing up as with those in grand cathedrals, as much in mud pies as in gold and silver vessels, as much in the ordinary things of life as in the special, sacred things.

This is something we all know intellectually but struggle to put into practice. Somehow it's easier to expect to encounter God in splendour than in squalor; though in reality, if, as the biblical tradition reminds us, it is not God who prefers the splendour, we might need to ask ourselves why we are so keen to ensure that God is set apart in glory and majesty.

## Everyday Christians

The reason why it is so important to recapture our sense of the ordinary is twofold. First, as I reflected above, if we insist in keeping God in splendour we lose so many opportunities to encounter him in our everyday lives. If we wait for silence, for fine surroundings, for spectacular music or art, then we devastate our chances of encountering the everyday God who stands by patiently illuminating the fields of our lives, while we pass by without noticing. The second reason is as important as the first. If we insist on God being ‘Sunday best’; then we naturally assume we have to be too.

I remember, as a child, listening with wide eyes to the spectacular stories and testimonies of those whose lives had been transformed by their Christian faith. Oddly, however, I never found this encouraging for my own faith, since I knew that my story would never be as dramatic as theirs. It took me years to realize that the fact that I had been brought up Christian and could only recount the gentle companionship of God over years rather than a dramatic account of transformation did not make me an inadequate Christian. Mine is not a dramatic story of faith – more an everyday one – but my ordinary, unexciting story of faith is as valued by God as the spectacular ones.

We do not need to be celebrity Christians, with fantastic, dramatic stories of faith. Our everyday God cherishes everyday Christians. What we need to learn to do, however, is to become better at telling our stories of everyday faith. This returns us to the theme of how important it is that we have confidence in ordinariness. We have become enculturated by the assumption that no story is worth telling unless it is dramatic, exciting and unusual, and so we no longer tell the ordinary stories. Because we do not

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tell the ordinary stories, we give the implicit message that everyday faith is of less value than dramatic, life changing experiences. The solution, of course, is to learn to tell our ordinary stories of faith with more confidence and in doing so we may discover that those moments of the sunbeams breaking through, that R. S. Thomas talks about, become more easily noticeable as we train ourselves to become recognizers of the extraordinary, ordinary things of God.

### On balance

Of course the problem with all this is that it can feel a little like counsel in favour of laziness: don't bother to set aside time for silence, you can worship God just as well at home as at church and there is no need to grow up into deeper and more profound faith – God loves you just as you are. All of these are true *and* false both at the same time. You don't need to lay aside time for silence, God is as much present in the hustle and bustle of everyday life as in the silence and tranquillity of prayer, but if we never lay aside time for silence, our inner ear will become less attuned to the still, small voice of God and we will find it harder to hear him in the hustle and bustle. You can worship God at home but unless we make corporate worship an important part of our lives, our daily worship of God can become shallow and thin. God does love you just the way you are but yearns that we all become the fullest and most Christ-like human being that we can.

The point about ordinariness is that it is the proper balance to extraordinariness. Our lives need both. The rhythm of the ordinary helps us to understand and celebrate more fully the festival times like Christmas and Easter; and those festival times help us to identify the things of God in ordinary times. God is to be found in

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the daily grind of life but it is taking time out of that grind in praise and prayer that helps us to recognize God in the ordinary things of life. God calls us just as we are, ordinary, everyday Christians, and summons us onwards into extraordinariness. We need both the everyday and the special, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and we need to wrestle to keep them in balance. Too much ordinary and we can lose sight of God; too much extraordinary and we slip into assuming that God, like us, does not really cherish the everyday.

This book seeks to celebrate ordinary faith and life in all its forms and as it does so to weave the extraordinary into the ordinary: to recognize that ordinary people, no matter who they are and what they do, are all extraordinary; to celebrate the fact that the extraordinary God we worship is most likely to be found among the ordinary things of life; and to remind us that glimpses of God or glimmers of glory are most likely to be found when, in the words of R. S. Thomas, we turn aside at nothing more extraordinary than a small field, 'to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once, but is the eternity that awaits you'.