

# ‘If it’s two o’clock, this must be Belgium’

*Dermot Preston*

MY MOTHER ALWAYS LIKED TO BE ORGANIZED. When the eight-strong Swiss Family Preston went on a continental tour in a converted British Rail truck in 1976, the criss-crossing of the various idiosyncratic European time-zones fazed her somewhat. The bobbing in and out of exotic places like Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium – each of which seemed to keep some version of European time, but none of whom kept up with British Summer Time – at one point had my mother wearing three different watches around her wrist: one to keep tabs on BST, one for the country we were passing through and the other for the mysterious country we *may* be passing through next . . . None of the rest of the clan could make head or tail of this temporal plate-spinning, but it seemed to give my mother some stability in the shifting sands of time, when she remembered to wind the watches, of course . . .

In a world of apparent growing diversity we find ourselves as human beings in the western world increasingly disorientated by the demands put upon us by various rhythms and tempos of life. Work and family, sport and recreation, religious and secular, private and public, local and global – all of these spheres of life have different timescales and emphases; each expects us to dance to its beat. How are we to weld them together? Is it best to go with the strongest flow? Or (as my mother attempted those many moons ago) should we ourselves try to impose some sort of order and priority on the often confusing, sometimes contradictory, rhythms that demand our uncritical observance?

In this article I would like to explore some of the aspects of living in the multi-time universe and then reflect a little on possible ways of coping more gracefully with the legitimate challenges these present to us.

## *Timepiece*

We measure the passage of time in a number of very natural ways. The cycle of the seasons is the biggest span we can practically orientate ourselves by – summer moves to autumn, to winter, then spring, and

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then back once more to summer, to give us a year. The cycles of the moon allow us to subdivide the year into months, while the sun becomes the guide which roughly etches out the difference between one day and the next. On the micro level, the pulse of the human heart gives us 'the second'. Each of these measures of passing time is very useful, but note that all of these scales are quite different from each other, and have their own uses with their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, feeling your pulse for 180 beats will probably allow you to time a reasonably good boiled egg, but if you tried doing a similar task using the phases of the moon it would most likely lead to madness, starvation or both.

So, although we tend to see measurement of time as some form of seamless robe, clock-time is actually just a clever compromise between different useful timescales. These rhythms do not 'naturally' mesh together – as we can see with the 'leap year' which is built in periodically to re-coordinate the off-beat solar and lunar calendars.

### *Time immemorial*

It has only been in the last 200 years that we have been able to harness vast amounts of energy and direct it for our own use at the click of a switch. In the days before artificial lighting human activities were dictated by the cycle of day and night. When it is light we see and we can do; when it is dark we cannot see and we do not do. Fire and candles shifted this pattern slightly, allowing the human being to be less dependent on the idiosyncrasies of unimaginative nature, allowing us quite literally to 'burn the midnight oil'. The clock has now become more the servant than the served.

As the human being became the engineer of mother earth, erecting Taj Mahals, carving *Pietàs* and forging space shuttles from the raw materials we found in the cave, so we have also become architects of time, taking it, channelling it and packaging it as *we* would like it, not as Father Time may have given it. This desire to create something perhaps at odds with nature's way should not be seen in itself as the work of the devil. The cruise missile that devastates a Belgrade police barracks is as much an 'artificial' curfew-breaker as the candle that allowed Thomas Aquinas patiently to write the *Summa theologica*. As with all human endeavour, it is thus not the fact that we do things differently from nature, but how and why we do them that makes them good or bad.

The fences imposed by the natural processes of time and convention are being breached at will, often with the able assistance of the new

technologies. Professional women in their forties buck the natural body-clock and choose to start families only when their working careers are established. Pensioners have now become people of the 'third-age' and with the assistance of a hip replacement and new heart valves, grandad is just as likely to be found wandering around the Hindu Kush as around the village green.

There has never been a time when there have not been clashes between competing timescales. The human body-clock does not always coincide with the outside world. Primitive Caveperson sometimes kept sleeping when the sun was up and there were still plenty of mammoths to slay. As body-clock will clash with nature, so nature will clash with desire, individual desire with community wants, community wants with family needs, etc. And on the ripples go, almost *ad infinitum*. Each sphere of human activity will clash with the demands of another.

What of today? The First World moves into greater and greater diversity of timescales. No longer does the cycle of night and day really impinge. Places like London and Los Angeles are not the only cities where 24-hour supermarket shopping is commonplace. Such facilities cater for consumers who work night-shifts and spend the daylight hours sleeping. Offices and factories work round the clock, unhampered by the lack of natural light. The availability of almost limitless accessible power (in particular the wonderful flexibility of electricity) has changed night into day and day into night. Factories, clubs, libraries, shopping malls, football stadia etc. hardly notice the movement into the quiet hours. Indeed, in many of the major cities of the world there are no 'quiet hours'. The traditional time in the early hours of the morning when TV and radio closed down, the traffic slowed, shops shut and silence reigned, is no more. 'New York – the city that never sleeps!' Indeed, as the dancers at a club would declare, why should we sleep? Why should we follow the dictates of particular conventions, when we can dance the night away – with the helpful boost of a handful of Ecstasy tablets?

On the macro scale, the global market is also dissolving geographical borders and forcing expectations of 24-hour competence across the financial world. If the Dow Jones is where the action is, it does not matter if you are the bright young thing on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange or a bleary-eyed middle-aged businessman at the end of a crackly, post-midnight telephone in Warsaw – you will be allowed no excuses for failure. Winners do not come in second. The clock makes no allowances; it takes no prisoners. Everything is *now*. Instant communication seems to suggest that *everything* can be now.

### *Timekeeper*

In the world of competing timescales, who calls the shots? Who declares the winner? Who says what is right or wrong? Through the ages, the echoing answer always appears to be the same – those with money and those with the loudest voice.

Let us reflect a little bit on sport. Various sporting activities have grown and developed in various cultures over the centuries: skating in Norway, surfing in Australia and hurling in Ireland have emerged, each from its people and their context. Each is part of the community, it has become part of the heritage. As activities they unite old and young, rich and poor, men and women. Some sports, at first, seem quite alien, but take root remarkably naturally – hockey in Pakistan or table tennis in China, for example – because they respond to a felt need. Over the years, these sports naturally become part of the shared tradition of the community.

But now, in the last thirty years, sport has become big business. Many people have realized what a goldmine it is. Thus we find that sports, which in some cases have been organically developing over centuries, are now being hurriedly repackaged to create consumer efficiency that will serve shareholder satisfaction. In the late 1970s an Australian entrepreneur saw that there was much money to be made in stuffy old cricket. Kerry Packer shook the game's establishment by setting up a rival league which would be more attractive and user-friendly, having short evening matches under floodlighting, wearing brightly coloured clothing and equipment and injecting a bit more eye-catching razzmatazz into cricket than was the norm at the time. Twenty years on, much of the Packer revolution has been incorporated into the mainstream of the sport.

The clout of the American media is clearly shown with regard to the Olympic Games. Setting, placement, timing and sometimes even the very inclusion of key events are driven by the windows of opportunity and peak hours on the US TV screens. Communication empires of the likes of CBS, NBC, FOX and CNN invest so much in the colourful five-ring circus that they logically want optimum payback.

In soccer, the transformation of Manchester United from being a popular and distinctive English football team to being a world-recognized 'brand-leader' with its own airport shops, a floating on the London Stock Exchange and (soon, perhaps) its own television station, is phenomenal.

But he who pays the piper calls the tune. It would be incredibly naïve to say that companies are in sport primarily for altruistic purposes.

Lucrative advertising space before a large, attentive, captive audience is the true goal of business in sport. The bottom line is profit. Have no doubt about it, if watching paint dry could pull in a bigger audience than Manchester United, then that is where the Rupert Murdochs of this world would be by preference.

To what extent has Manchester United, with its team of international all-stars, now lost its born and bred north-of-England roots? There was a time when the pattern of two matches a week with the occasional Cup competition was quite manageable for clubs and supporters alike. But now the kaleidoscopic swirl of League and Cup, National, European and World matches at home and across the globe, puts enormous stress on to both the modern player (making him into something of a very well-paid battery hen) and the traditional local supporters. In particular, the fans face the difficult and expensive choice of either keeping track of 'their team' by jumping on the careering bandwagon of matches, tours and 'occasions' designed and driven by the marketing men and merchandisers, or being left behind with the associated feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, disorientation and – in some cases – genuine bereavement at having lost something important in their lives.

Harmless entertainment, you might feel; but like the cuckoo in the nest, when threatened, such temporal empires as News International, Turner Television and Bernie Ecclestone brook no opposition and will subtly push other rival eggs out of the tree. You see this happening with sport. To be a true supporter you are expected to hand over huge amounts of money and time to demonstrate how serious you are about your sport. It is no longer 'only a game', which takes its rightful place in a balanced cultural milieu; it has now muscled in to become a way of life. On a religious level, Good Friday is an interesting example. Now the day has little to do with people's spiritual lives, but has become a convenient hook on which to hang an entire programme of marathons, football games, horse-races and cricket matches. The rhythm of some people's days can thus come to be dictated by the skeleton of sports served up on TV and satellite. The bleary-eyed devotee of the PGA Masters from Augusta, Georgia, or the jaded acolyte who has been drinking deeply from the wells of the Embassy Snooker World Championship from Sheffield, is not a rare creature. Sport is their religion.

I suppose the phenomenon is not new. The average ancient Roman had similar tensions between Temple and Colosseum but it is important to be clear that although this situation is probably *familiar* to many ages, it does not make it healthy for *any* age. Business will always be

willing to feed an addiction or an obsession as long as the price is right, so it must not be taken as an impartial guide to living 'the good life'.

Occasionally reality refreshingly breaks through. During the 1998 Soccer World Cup Finals in France, the BBC's anchorman-for-all-seasons, Des Lynam, was holding the chair at half-time on the England vs. Argentina quarter-final. For the viewers' benefit, Des was doing a statistical run-down on the amount of football that had taken place by that stage of the competition. He had worked out that there had been a total of 72 hours of football played to date. He reflected out loud, that for somebody to have seen *all* the matches they would have had to have been viewing for a full three days! 'But', he added, 'if you *have* watched all the matches so far – get a life!'

### *Time out*

Cultures have always varied in their perceptions and the value of time. When an Irish academic was asked whether there was a Gaelic parallel of the laid-back Spanish term *mañana*, he pondered for a moment and then replied that he didn't think there was a equivalent word in the Celtic tongue that quite conveyed the *urgency* of the Spanish . . . Urban 'German time' is clipped and precise and is clearly best followed with a stop-watch, whereas rural 'African time' is unhurried and vague and its follower needs nothing more accurate than a sundial.

However, over the last forty years or so, there does seem to have been a trend of a growing westernization of concepts of time. These beliefs are spreading and changing world-cultures and perceptions. With the greater choice of things to do, a more efficient and discrete apportioning and packaging of time has become 'essential' for the person wanting to do the myriad of things which are now on offer. Proper management of time allows less time to be 'wasted'. All time is to be harnessed and become practical and useful.

Heretical to modern ways though this may seem, I suspect that we have to learn to waste more time, because it is the very 'gaps' between activities that help define and prioritize these activities. Playing all the notes of a Mozart symphony *at the same time* would certainly save a good half-hour, but the resulting experience would be noise, not music. A Mozart symphony needs 'wasted time' between the notes, allowing pauses to give space for each sound to come into existence individually. Notes carve the musical masterpiece out of the silence. Time is of the essence.

Likewise we need gaps in our lives. We need to 'waste time' for the masterpiece of our lives to take shape. Air-travel allows us to get to any part of the globe within twenty-four hours, but sometimes it is important to take time getting to a place. It is the difference between travel and pilgrimage. Life is more a pilgrimage than a journey.

Spiritually the human heart must be anchored in something which nourishes at a deep level. 'The heart is not at rest until it rests in God.' If a person's life is not hooked into something of a pulsing 'liturgical' heartbeat that orientates him or her towards the encounter with God, and that is calling them to integrity within their deepest being, then they will find themselves disturbed and dissatisfied in their wider lives. There is plenty of time and space for 'secular' pursuits as such, but the basic time-line of a person must be rooted in God. We must learn to waste time with God.

### *Time-honoured*

A worrying and deep phenomenon in the present world is to be found in the fragmentation of any form of communitarian time-lines. This can come seductively under the title of 'choice', but the effect is more destructive than the term would indicate. This fragmentation-through-diversity appears to be leading to a subtle isolation of the individual from any form of community experience. This probably marks the extreme swing away from the typical village life in medieval times when little variety, self-expression or stimulation was possible and where the individual was more likely to die from boredom than loneliness. Today this has changed and the privatization of time has become dominant. No form of *public* time is allowed to take precedence over my individual choice. This is the total opposite of the situation a generation ago where many community experiences were shared – even holidays. For two weeks in the summer almost the entire working population of Glasgow would decamp to Blackpool, the seaside resort in the North of England, for their annual break. Almost all the people you knew at home for fifty weeks of the year, you would meet in Blackpool. Monotonous in the extreme, some may think, but a powerfully bonding community experience none the less.

Take television as another example. A quarter of a century ago in the UK, Christmas night was a time when the vast majority of the population sat down and watched *The Morecambe and Wise Show*. In the days following it provided a shared experience with friends, family and total strangers. It formed a shared language for a street, a town, a factory, a school, a nation. Such shared viewing-experiences were not

uncommon. Now, however, with the blossoming of TV choice, any notion of a community of viewers has nearly vanished: everybody watches what they want, when they want, sometimes choosing from as many as 200 cable and satellite channels – one person watches an Attenborough nature documentary, another Beavis and Butthead, while yet others tune in to re-runs of *Deep space nine*. Shared viewing experiences are increasingly rare, seldom happy and often limited to national disasters or the funeral of a princess.

### ***Time bomb***

We are subtly cutting ourselves off from the outside world. The seasonal pattern of nature is being kept at arm's length. A few years ago, when I lived in a council-housing estate in the East End of London, I realized that when I looked out of the window of the flat all I could see was concrete. From the view itself, it would be impossible to tell what time of year it was – there was neither leafless tree (for autumn) nor patch of browned grass (for seriously hot summer). Only the ambiguous, multi-seasonal rain impinged on this bleak panorama.

As individuals and as society we are trying to get rid of the unpredictability that nature brings with it. Rain makes grass muddy, so we tarmac the road and make it more user-friendly. That's fine in one sphere – but don't we appear to be doing that unthinkingly across the board? We seem to be sculpting our world so that we can hermetically seal out uncontrollable nature. We make night into day, we can turn winter into summer. After a short flight a tourist from snow-bound Helsinki can be sunning herself on a beach in southern Spain. We pick and choose our weather, our day, what we eat (pawpaw in springtime? roses in December?) and we become very intolerant when nature breaks through and messes up our plans. I become angry when the snow makes my train late. I give the stewardess a hard time after my flight is diverted by dangerous winds. The outside world must come into my universe by invitation only: tears come to my eyes when I decide to listen to a documentary on the latest African famine, but I am irritated that the jar of coffee in the supermarket is a few coins more expensive because the Venezuelan farmers' bean-crop was destroyed. Comfort and predictability must be controlled and on tap when *I* want it.

### ***Time-signal***

There is one aspect of our year that causes gentle havoc to controllers and planners, and that is Easter. Theologically there would be nothing heretical in having a fixed date for Easter (as we have for Christmas)



but perhaps the fact that we still have a fluctuating Easter – which is tied to the lunar calendar – is a sign of contradiction in which we should rejoice. Businesses complain and academic institutions froth because Easter 'gets in the way'. They would love to pin it down, for all sorts of good and logical reasons. But logic isn't everything. Mixing a few metaphors: are freak weather and the date of Easter perhaps the only rolling cannons that are jamming their wheels in the elevator-door of the onward march of western life? In our modern world, where we seldom see the stars, hear the wind or feel the rain upon our face, it is perhaps salutary to have nature making its presence felt, even unpleasantly. Human beings have a tendency to control. We try it with nature; we try it with time and we try it with God.

If all things are created to love, honour and serve God, how can time help us in this? I suppose my mother's response to the European time-zones may be of some help here. Although she was rather Canute-like, we can learn from her attempts not to be too easily caught up in the dynamics of the flow. In the short term it can be quite exhilarating, but ultimately the heart seeks orientation, not disorientation. Modern life will throw down many options which demand our attention and adherence, but it is our responsibility to steer our way through consciously, by making informed choices – or we will ultimately have our choices made for us.

### *End time*

In my spare time, I count up my jobs and grumble: university chaplain, local superior, assistant Novice Master, Ecclesiastical Assistant for the South African Christian Life Communities, Western Cape Jesuit Vocations Director – all of these roles make demands on my time, pulling me back and forth and up and down. Each role demands time from the others. Everybody feels short-changed. When I'm low, self-pity creeps in: 'No one in the world is more put upon than me!'

I was hurrying down the road near the university a few months back, late – as usual – for an appointment. Sitting on a wall by the side of the road was a homeless 'king of the road' (a 'bergie', as the Capetonians would call him). As I passed, we looked at each other and exchanged smiles. But then he put up his hand to stop me. My heart sank – another request for a few rands for his bus fare? But he did not ask me that.

'Could you tell me the time, please?' he said.

I consulted my watch. 'Quarter to two,' I replied.

He looked at me with surprise. 'Oh!' he said, climbing off the wall, obviously remembering an appointment. With a cheery wave he picked

up his carrier bag and set off with a purpose, back along the road. I can't remember what made me turn round after I'd gone a further twenty metres, but I did. There was the man, climbing back on the wall.

It slowly dawned on me what had happened. I may complain about the meetings I have to go to, the commitments I need to keep, the demands that are made on me – but what of the person who has *none* of these? Are the people who are denied any engagement with social tempos or society's rhythms the ones who truly suffer the ultimate oppression by time? What is it like when nobody wants you? When nobody cares if you are here or there? How crushing is it when you aren't indispensable? When your absence wouldn't be missed? You rise with the sun and set with the sun, and your timescale impinges on nobody else's life.

The isolation of the *bergie* sitting on the wall was complete. He saw me hurrying – and he too wanted to hurry somewhere; to be missed somewhere when he didn't arrive; to be seen to be meeting a deadline anywhere. For just that moment when we met, he could give the impression to someone else that he too was tied into the competing timescales of the world. He too was under starter's orders for the human race. He too was needed.

Living in the multi-time world is not the worst thing in life. It certainly throws up powerful, but legitimate, challenges to the ways in which we should respond to existence. But let us keep things in perspective: perhaps the more serious gauntlet thrown down before Christianity is the call to break into the hell which is populated by those people who have been totally excluded from any of society's timescales: those who only glimpse time as the precious thing that is manipulated, given or withheld by the powerful. Who will *take time* to listen to the voiceless? To protect the defenceless? To remember the forgotten? What happens to the people at the bottom of the heap whom no one wants to include in their diary?

That day near the university made me realize this truth. I grumble a little less often now.

**Dermot Preston** studied chemistry before joining the British Province of the Society of Jesus in 1979. Following ordination he worked as Vocations Director for the province for five years. After tertianship in the Philippines he went to South Africa where he has been Chaplain at the University of Cape Town since 1996.