

‘The readiness is all’

Time and the spiritual journey

Gemma Simmonds

If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2)

I HAD MADE THE FULL THIRTY-DAY SPIRITUAL EXERCISES twice, and had some twenty years of making annual eight-day retreats before I began plying the formal trade of accompanying other pilgrims on their spiritual journey. What I write here is the fruit of my own experiences as a pilgrim, immeasurably enriched and enlightened by the honest struggle of people who have let me be their companion. The Spiritual Exercises, made under whatever form, have brought into sharp relief for them and me the subtle interplay that exists between time as *chronos* and time as *kairos*. *Chronos* is what flies past us on the fast track of modern western life. There is never enough of it to accomplish the tasks we set ourselves. We measure it in calendar years, financial and fiscal years, academic years and in nanoseconds. We look into our journals and photo albums, into our mirrored faces and those of our grandchildren and we wonder where the time went. What happened to the plans, the good intentions, energy, graces and inspirations we received? How are we to account to God, to the world, to ourselves for our stewardship of *chronos*?

And then across *chronos* comes *kairos* – the moment, the ‘hour’ that Jesus himself awaited, and knew when at last it came.¹ There comes a moment of inspiration, a sudden surge of courage or desperation, a rekindling of an old desire or a sense of ‘now or never’ when we know that we must act on the sudden or long-dormant urgings of our heart or die altogether to our deepest longings. This can come as a lightning bolt or can creep up on us unawares. It can arise in the context of daily life, or in the struggle to maintain our faith-life, or to come to a choice. Here, but more markedly in the making of the Exercises themselves, there can be a particular movement of grace, a confirmation in faith, hope or love. We feel sure that our hour has come. Or on the contrary it can be the dread-full, heart-breaking hour when we go into the desert only to find it filled with the demons whom we have been assiduously avoiding for

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years. Our prayer is full of tedium and darkness, our hearts weary beyond belief. Either way the authenticity of our *kairos* is subjected to the clarifying and verifying effects of *chronos*. Ignatius invites us neither to burst into flames of enthusiasm nor to fall down chasms of hopeless darkness but to allow time to be the measure of the authenticity of grace.² That most desolate and undecided of mortals, Hamlet, expresses in his musings Ignatius' sense of the fine balance between *chronos* and *kairos* and the need for each to be at the service of the other. Time is the measure of a number of factors within the experience of making and accompanying the Exercises, and more generally of the spiritual journey. With the help of some pilgrims, who have allowed me to make free with their individual stories, I present some reflections on both kinds of time.

There are numerous references to time within the annotations, and time plays an implicit role in the Notes for the Discernment of Spirits in the First and Second Weeks. A cursory reading of the text as if it were a manual of spiritual technology could lead one to think that it is heavily directive, and obsessed with the minutiae of keeping to this or that hour, composition or practice. But the text of the Exercises shows the same amount of flexibility, human understanding and spiritual *savoir-faire* as the Ignatian Constitutions. There is certainly a detailed and precise framework. But the framework must always be enlivened by the needs and situation of the pilgrim and the discretion and experience of the companion, to be used or discarded 'as shall seem best in Our Lord'.³ The whole idea of Weeks at all is confusing for pilgrims used to the word used in its strict sense. But in the world of the Exercises we can do what we often long to be able to do in the world of everyday reality and stretch or shorten time so that it suits our needs. Pilgrims in thirty-day retreats can spend three weeks on the First Week or come out of the Exercises still firmly stuck in the Third Week only to have resurrection sweep them up in clouds of glory several weeks later when they get back home. Where a number of retreatants are making the full Exercises in a group together, there is always a fine line to be drawn between the potential chaos of struggling to dovetail twenty different timetables and dragooning everyone into travelling at the same pace, regardless of their experience, for the sake of domestic arrangements. But 'the readiness is all'.⁴

'If it be now'

The choice when and under what form to make the Exercises is often determined by the time apparently available to the pilgrim. I say

'apparently', because time is itself an elusive concept – a precious commodity in which modern people trade with themselves and God. A pilgrim's willingness to take seriously the time he or she will need to make the Exercises in a satisfactory way is often the first measure of the seriousness of their desire and commitment. So time can become the measure of desire, and also the measure of realism. Ignatius often alludes to the link between time and the generosity of heart he considers so crucial to the making of the Exercises. Part of the 'preparing and making ourselves ready' is the negotiation of the time available and therefore of the form under which the Exercises will be attempted.⁵ In itself this also presupposes that the time is right. Given the relationship between time and desire which Ignatius notes, the desire to make the Exercises might be taken as a sign of the readiness to do so. But horror stories are told in retreat houses of pilgrims packing their bags furiously twenty-four hours after arriving to make the thirty days, or of companions wearily struggling with a pilgrim through a month of anything but what is recognizably the Exercises. A good question to ask of anyone desiring to make the long retreat or the retreat in daily life is not only 'Do you have the time for this?' but 'Why does this feel like the right time in your life to do it?'

Kate is a wife and mother of three unruly and demanding adolescents, working more than part-time to keep the family finances afloat. Her marriage is tired and so is she. Midway through an introductory course on Ignatian spirituality she becomes convinced that she is being called to make the thirty-day retreat and to become a full-time spiritual director. Obvious questions arise about whether such a desire is consistent with her fundamental life-choices. One major question is whether at the moment she has the time and mental space available for such an undertaking. Would a retreat in daily life be better? Or indeed is this the right answer at all, or would it be better to look more closely at the way in which time is currently filled as she engages, or fails to engage, with her present reality? If there is a glaring disparity between a pilgrim's sense of *kairos* and the limits of their *chronos*, then something deeper may be at stake than the practical workings out of a retreat. John is a policeman who for several years has been sitting on a sense of dissatisfaction with his career. 'I keep feeling I ought to do something, go on retreat, get this sorted.' It may be that his sense of *kairos* is slow in developing. But it could go off the boil if the moment is not grasped. A challenge by his companion results in his making a serious commitment of *chronos* in pursuit of his sense of

kairos. He makes a retreat in daily life which leads him to choose retraining as a nurse.

We live in a world of quick fixes and instant solutions. Bookshops make fortunes with self-help manuals promising the ten-minute salvation of our marriages, waistlines and psychological health. Taking a month out of a twenty-first-century life or setting aside serious time per week for months on end in order to engage in radical encounter with God is certainly a measure of seriousness of purpose. But Ignatius urges caution in the estimation both of the pilgrim's capacity for this type of encounter and of the ripeness of the time for it. There can be a profound sense of *kairos* for some pilgrims, especially those for whom the expense in terms of time and money is a major factor in making the Exercises. It is a sacrifice, but one whose worth is measured in the satisfying of a desire or need that can no longer be ignored. Many speak of having held on to this desire for years, of having tried to avoid the urging of the still, small voice. Others long for the opportunity to encounter God in a radical way without knowing how to go about it, or where to find help. They tell tales of providential encounters on a bus, in a passing conversation, or on the Internet that lead them to a retreat house or a companion who can accompany the process of 'choosing life'. It seems as if God gives both the *kairos* and the opportunity to fulfil it.

The experience of the Exercises brings us face to face in a radical way with the relationship between time and grace. Why is it that we can beg for a grace with all the faith at our disposal for years on end, and receive no answer? Sometimes it can seem both to pilgrim and to companion that God is playing hard to get just for the sake of it. The most awe-inspiring tales of the relationship between *chronos* and *kairos* have been told to me by pilgrims with a background in alcohol and chemical addictions or destructive patterns of self-abuse. Years of struggle and degradation, yo-yo swings of drunkenness and sobriety, anorexia and bulimia are fought against a background of fruitlessly begging God for help. Then the moment of crisis arrives, a family ultimatum, a friendly touch or some seemingly trivial incident which just tips the balance from despair to hope, from destructive reliance on a broken and untrustworthy self to beginning the long road home, step by step with God as guide. Here, it would seem most radically, 'the readiness is all', and it remains part of the mystery of God's grace as to the how and the when. But the opposite can also be true, and our seizure of the moment may prove to be the measure of our co-operation with grace. In his autobiography Kenneth Clark gives us a salutary example

of the first 'Kind of Person'.⁶ He tells of a moment when, 'surprised by joy', he knew he was being invited to a life of faith. But he balked at the human price of conversion, and prevaricated until he let the moment go.⁷

'If it be not to come, it will be now'

Using Ignatius' own metaphor of the similarity between physical and spiritual exercise, it pays, within the context of the Exercises proper, to have some warm-up time. The pilgrim needs space 'to prepare and make ready for the consolation which is to come',⁸ detaching sufficiently from the concerns of everyday life and detoxifying from the frenetic pace of modern life. What is characteristic in Ignatius' instructions on preparation is the apparent contradiction between his flexibility and his insistence on adherence to detailed directives. While repeatedly stressing the necessity to take the pilgrim's needs as the compass point for such decisions, he prescribes carefully throughout the Exercises for physical position in prayer, the context and surroundings in which the pilgrim seeks to encounter God, and the timing and manner of the encounter. A modern author might speak of 'getting into the right space' rather than of 'composition of place', but the fundamental idea is of an holistic approach whereby all things, material and spiritual, are put at the service of God's grace, working within the individual. Michael Ivens points out that this is where we see the Exercises not simply as a programme but as a personal faith-journey with all the variables required to accommodate human difference.⁹

Laura works in PR, and has made a serious commitment to the retreat in daily life as part of a vocations discernment programme. Time for prayer and reflection is limited by her work in the City, but there is something else behind this. Her companion detects a certain restlessness, an inability to settle to the original suggestion of an early start in the morning for daily meditation. It may betray an unrecognized fear of engaging with the challenge of a deeper relationship with God. But it may also reflect a genuine unease with a pattern of praying which is alien and unhelpful. Laura wants to try walking across the park to work instead of going by Tube, taking the extra time to pray as she walks. Within two weeks it is clear that this is where prayer and reflection of genuine depth are taking place for Laura, who since childhood has encountered God and her own deepest self when out walking.

But the greatest struggle with *chronos* here will usually be in the context of length and time of prayer. I think there is a particular difficulty with this, connected to the pace of western life, with its

instant access to information through the Internet and instant gratification of needs and desires through fast food and drive-through facilities. It will get more and more abnormal for us to have to wait, and this will inevitably have an impact on our unconscious expectations where God is concerned. Our expectations become set by our lived experience so that it can be hard to adapt, in the context of prayer, to the pace of the desert. Ignatius advises flexibility, but with a healthy scepticism about the way in which the enemy uses a sense of wasted time or time hanging heavily to divert us from our purpose.¹⁰

But if warm-up time is helpful, so is cool-down time. There can be trauma in the return from the timeless desert of the thirty days where paradoxically we can be both acutely aware of the slow passage of time while oblivious to the passage of 'real' time in the external world. If we have got into a rhythm and framework of prayer, how to adapt the pace when we emerge from the desert into our everyday lives and patterns again can be a huge challenge. Integrating the graces and inspirations received while living in a completely different context and at a completely different pace is a grace in itself, and can only be hammered out over time. Here is where memory comes into its own, and in the triad of Ignatius' *Suscipe* it is at the service of understanding and will. Like Peter, a pilgrim may experience the desire to fix the moment of glory for ever, to stay up on the mountain-top and not go down to what lies in wait below. Or there may be anxiety about how to remain faithful to a hard-won conversion. The intensity will certainly fade, and many of the richer glosses may also disappear. But no biblical text will ever appear the same again after being prayed through during the course of the Exercises. The pilgrim often reaches a sharply heightened sensory awareness, becoming so finely tuned that he or she notices minute shifts in the inner world of affective reactions or in the outer world of nature. Memory will repeatedly trigger these responses, as will exercises of memory such as journalling, the examen and the review of prayer. An open heart and a willing spirit will find that *chronos*, far from being the enemy of grace, can become its servant and the means for a grace to become more deeply incarnated.

'If it be not now yet it will come'

'The grace of the Exercises at any particular moment', says Ivens, 'is in the present, even if the present may be laborious. Hence Ignatius warns against the temptation to escape from the present into a future stage of the Exercises.'¹¹

Where we see the interplay of *kairos* and *chronos* most clearly in the Exercises is in the Annotations concerning the giving of material and in the Rules for Discernment. Above all, the Exercises are a process, not a package, and Ignatius' insistence on generosity and trust as the fundamental dispositions for openness to God's grace indicates how essential such dispositions are for an effective entrance into that process. In the face of a pilgrim all gung-ho for the next set of points or lost in the misery or boredom of a long-drawn-out experience of God's absence, it is tempting for the companion to move swiftly on to what is hoped might be greener pastures. It can be hard for the companion, let alone the actual pilgrim, to hang on in there. Mary Ward, who knew more than most about waiting on God's time and containing her soul in patience and hope wrote, in 1629: 'We must abide God almighty his time and leisure, for we must follow and not go before Him'.¹² The wisdom of working against the tedium of prayer by lengthening rather than shortening the time is not only a matter of discipline but a sure way of uncovering, if it is there, a conscious or unconscious mechanism of avoidance. The struggle with boredom or despair may be bitter and may even last throughout the Exercises and beyond. But we are constantly reminded that it is God who gives grace – even the dark grace of suffering, an awareness of our incapacity to pray without divine aid. It can be hard, as the companion, to sit on one's hands and watch the pilgrim suffer, but this is where the companion's primary role as provider of kindly encouragement comes to the fore.

Andrew is eighteen years into religious life, burnt out with overzealous application of his energies to the mission. He longs for the thirty-day retreat as part of a sabbatical programme while dreading the violent change of rhythm from flat-out pastoral work to long hours of silence and prayer. He arrives at the retreat house exhausted but generous, apprehensive about the fact that he has been cutting corners with prayer for years and cannot remember when he last meditated or made his examen in any regular sense. He gets into the retreat, only to find himself engulfed in a well of appalling despair, where God is nowhere to be found. Each prayer period is kept to meticulously, but God's absence is all the more acute for Andrew's fidelity. The accumulated undealt-with issues of years begin to emerge in horrifying dreams from which he awakes shaken with sobbing. His companion holds firm, but all her kindness and experience cannot take the pain away or resolve the desolation. The struggle with God becomes the context for Andrew to pour out his rage and frustration. Yet beneath it all is an unshaken fidelity and hope. A picture of the struggle of Jacob

and the angel becomes precious, as do the gospel story of the cripple at the pool of Bethesda and the words of Hosea: 'That he will come is as certain as the dawn'.¹³

The retreat ends without much resolution of the issue, and Andrew remains torn between resignation and deep disappointment. A week after the retreat he is standing on top of some castle battlements, thinking of his ruined hopes. He is suddenly overwhelmed by an unassailable conviction of God's loving care for him, and of God as his fortress and strong tower. The struggle with the unbearable weight of *chronos* has proved worthwhile, and the God of surprises has led him to a *kairos* that flowers and develops down the ensuing years.

'The readiness is all'

I was much struck by a conversation overheard recently in a pastoral centre.

'Of course, he never really made the Exercises.'

'Really? Why not?'

'Oh, he never made an Election.'

Was the first speaker, a companion of many years' standing, right in her assumption? How can we be sure that we or those we accompany have made or failed to make an election in the way Ignatius meant? And if we have not made it, is all lost? Much is said in the Rules for Discernment on the state of the pilgrim's current life and dispositions, the progress, or lack of it, in virtue and human and spiritual maturity. But even here, *chronos* may be operating at different paces, and it is worth remembering that most of us are a complex mixture of the mature and the infantile, moving in an ever-shifting ebb and flow of the stages of human development. In the last gasp of this millennium, we come at the Exercises with the mentality of an age driven by results, league tables and quality control. But God's grace has a pace all its own, and will not be driven or anticipated. A decision not to make a decision may be a God-given piece of wisdom, and may be an election in itself, though in a case such as Kenneth Clark's it may also be a way of wriggling off the hook.¹⁴ Or it may be that a pilgrim has the desire, but not yet the capacity to make an election, and is called to sit with the desire for as long as it takes for it to mature into a readiness for the grace.

My French grandmother, a magnificent cook, used to advise 'Laissez-le mijoter', recommending the principle of allowing time for the full

flavour of every ingredient in a dish to come through. In the same way, Ignatius recommends careful reflection on the whole process of a grace or a temptation from beginning, middle to end so as to know what's in there.

This is surely also the purpose behind Ignatius' insistence both on the Triple Colloquy and on our naming our desire, the *id quod volo*, in our prayer. There can be a temptation to cut the preliminaries and get down to 'real' prayer immediately, or to come to a businesslike conclusion at the end. But in doing this we can miss the delicate touch of the Spirit working within us. Taking the necessary time also ensures that we engage in the process of petition or examen or meditation in the light of God's vision and power and not our own.¹⁵ In the *Suscipe* Ignatius offers God his memory, understanding and will. His frequent references to the role of the will in prayer have driven some to conclude that his is a muscular spirituality, a matter of taking God by storm through teeth-gritting determination. Nothing could be further from the truth. What is at stake here is a delicate interplay between will and desire, between faith and love. Ignatius proposes appropriate desires to us before a meditation, or they may emerge spontaneously in our prayer. But we may react with dismay, feeling unwilling or unable to name such desires or follow them through with a response. The Exercises are not an instant fix, and Ignatius assumes that there will often be a time-lapse, perhaps even a lifelong one, while we adapt to the promptings of grace. The famous Jesuit Constitution 102 asks if a candidate might at least feel the desire to have a desire for humility with Christ humble. When our will is placed at God's disposal in this way, then by God's grace, *chronos* will bring us to whatever *kairos* providence has in store.

We are creatures of time and space, and it is in the dynamic interplay between time and grace that we travel as pilgrims Godward. The Exercises provide a rich source of reflection, as well as an excellent methodology for understanding the relationship between *chronos* and *kairos* and our co-operation with the workings of God's grace in our life. Who knows, had Hamlet made the Exercises, the state of Denmark might not have become so rotten after all . . .

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NOTES

1 John 2:4; 12:23.

2 Exx 14, 318, 321, 323, 333.

3 Exx 4.

4 Exx 4, 18.

5 Exx 1, 5, 6, 12, 13, 19, 20.

6 Exx 153.

7 K. Clark, *The other half: a self-portrait* (London, 1977), p 108. But God is not so easily to be fobbed off, and Clark was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed.

8 Exx 7.

9 Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster, 1998), p 6.

10 Exx 12, 13, 319, 322, 327.

11 Ivens, p 11.

12 Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (ed), *The heart and mind of Mary Ward* (Wheathampstead, 1985), p 47.

13 Hosea 6:3.

14 See Ivens, p 8, for his comment on Annotation 6.

15 See also Ivens p 40 on the General Examen, p 51 on arousing the affections of the heart with the will and p 53 on colloquy.