

Hamster Wheel – Sermon the Mount

Please allow me to introduce you to “Happy Hamster”, on loan from a six year old girl. Happy hamster clearly has a happy existence: Destined to spend his or her days, spinning the hamster wheel until his or her battery runs out. No wonder Happy Hamster, is happy.

I don't think happy hamster is alone. What is your hamster wheel? We don't have to think too hard about the possibilities: for some it will be career, pouring precious hours of your life down the drain of work. Who was it that said, no one on their death bed ever says, “Oh, I wish I'd put in more hours at the office”? Sure there are plenty of my friends who, after university, poured stupid weekly hours into work so that they could become top lawyers and so on... and it is a hamster existence.

But equally, work and career are not always about building careers. For plenty, working stupid hours is a necessity to make ends meet. And there is no escape from the endless cycle of overly long hours. And it is a hamster existence.

Equally, if you're retired, and your battery hasn't packed up, there is the new hamster-wheel of voluntary work in all its many and various forms. People who've been programmed to believe that the Protestant Work ethic is an unquestionable good, often have no choice but to carry on doing some form of work no matter what, because their humanity is bound up with what they are able to do, and what they are able to produce in measurable, calculable ways. And it is a hamster existence.

For others, the hamster wheel will be impossible to get off. Bringing up a family on your own. Some will have had the experience of pouring half a day cleaning and tidying the house, only to watch it descend into chaos within ten minutes of the children coming home from school. And by the time you have read with them, made their tea, fed them their tea, cleaned up after tea, got them ready for bed, put them to bed, kept them in bed ... by the time you've done all those things, the next day has already begun... and the whole thing starts again. And it is a hamster experience.

In a place like London, there are plenty obsessed with finding the perfect partner – Bridget Jones types, who invest every scrap of emotional energy into dating in order to find a partner that's good enough for them... Pouring precious energy and resources into creating the right impression and projecting the right image. And it is a hamster existence.

And there will be plenty of people with issues of self worth – who can only keep themselves happy by running around doing all kinds of good things for other people, all with the intention of getting some of self-worth out of their busyness because the only way to feel happy about yourself is for everyone to know what a great person you are. And it is a hamster existence.

And what is it that Happy Hamster wants to be distracted from? Maybe Happy Hamster is lonely, and needs to fill his or her days doing anything possible to avoid it going quiet, and having to face the reality of who you really are.

But individuals are not alone in their hamster wheel existence. I wonder whether whole communities find themselves stuck on some form of a hamster wheel. Since the 80s, and to some extent before, Churches have become pre-occupied with desired outcomes. We see empty pews where there used to be bums on seats ... and so we set out to get more bums on

seats, adopt an up-beat, user-friendly approach – and focus on what we regard as ‘mission’. And I’ve belonged to more than one church where this had become the hamster wheel. The churches never grew of course, but everyone was happy because we had the hamster wheel of mission to keep us all going – finding ever new sets of goals aims and objectives before the last ones had been achieved!

Or we could become preoccupied with political action – rightly believing that Christian worship has practical, political and social implications in the real world. Well, three cheers for that. But then it’s easy to leapfrog from worship time, to practical doing, social outreach, political campaigning and pastoral care, because engaging properly with any of that embarrassing God-stuff. No no – better to keep our selves busy – without any of that pointless sentimental spiritual stuff. And once again, it’s a hamster wheel existence.

What is it that the hamster wheel is preventing?
What is it that we fear if the hamster wheel stops turning?
What will we be forced to confront when the battery runs out?

Jesus is on the mountainside again. We are a little further through the sermon on the mount. A sermon in which Jesus is addressing people living in poverty and oppression, hunger and thirst, a daily grind that is exhausting and dehumanising. And there was no way out! It was a gigantic first century Palestinian hamster wheel.

On a first reading, it’s easy to hear Jesus telling people to stop being superficial. Don’t worry about what you will eat or drink or wear. It’s worth remembering though, that Jesus is not addressing people who are concerned about whether it should be lobster or caviar for the dinner they are preparing. These are people concerned about whether there is going to be any dinner at all! It’s worth remembering that Jesus not addressing people who might be tempted to update their wardrobe because their self-esteem is under threat now that their clothes are slipping out of fashion. He is addressing people who do not have much in the way of clothing, and need to keep warm and keep working.

What was that Walt Disney song: I think it was from the jungle book: look for the bare the necessities, the simple bare necessities, forget about your worries and your strife! Well, that is exactly what Jesus was not saying! Jesus is saying, even, forget about the bare necessities!

The people whom Jesus is addressing, are not running after trivial, pointless dreams. These are people who are concerned about the actual stuff that they need to be concerned about if they are going to survive. So, when Jesus tells them to stop worrying about these things – because that is what pagans do – what is he saying?

To tell people to stop worrying about their children crying for food, the rumbling in their own stomach, the food and drink. Jesus is taking the bare necessities of life, and calling even those things, secondary. At the root of human existence, says Jesus, is the kingdom of God. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you as well.

But let’s be clear again, about what he is not saying! He is not saying – ah, if you worship God, God will bless you financially! If you forget about those things and focus upon being a holy person ... all manner of nice things will happen to you because God will bless you. Instead, it seems, he is offering a different vision of what it means to be human.

In the midst of the hamster wheel existence that shapes us in so many different ways – there is the call to focus upon the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, the kingdom of God and his justice.

And if you have a community in which Justice for all, care of the widows and the orphans and the people who consider themselves lonely or forgotten or outcast or excluded or betrayed – when you have a kingdom of justice, these people find themselves cared for. This is the vision of justice that we find time and time again throughout the prophets – this, is the kingdom of God that we should be seeking. Not forcing God's kingdom to come in because we are dealing with the great problems in the world directly, so that we can fix the problem. But focussing primarily on the community's relationship with God, in worship.

Because if it really is the Kingdom of God that we seek, then one of the accidental, unwitting and perhaps unseen and uncelebrated consequences, is that all these other things are added to us as well. I think of my Baptist minister friend in retirement – who never in a million years would have described himself as political – and who makes sure that he spends his few minutes alone with God and his bible and his prayer each day. And the fact is that this man is politically active in all kinds of ways of which he has no idea – because he loves the people on his doorstep and he has compassion upon people who suffer beyond his doorstep. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things happen in the community anyway.

A community that focuses upon righting all the wrongs are about as effective as captain beaky and his band: The bravest animals in the land are captain beaky and his band, that's timid toad, reckless rat, artful owl and batty bat, march through the woodland singing songs that tell how they have righted wrongs... Said Captain beaky, follow me, and ran headfirst into a tree. The whole point of the song, and of this sermon – seems to be that if you prioritise fixing either your own problems or the problems of the world – you are condemned to a hamster wheel existence.

Seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness, one of the results would be a community in which the worries outlined are dealt with as an accidental consequence of loving God and loving neighbour.

Somebody said to me yesterday, Oh, I don't know how you cope with four children. And the fact is, nobody can cope with four children. But why on earth would you want to cope with your own children? If I have a million things I want to achieve and do in my own life, then sure, children are going to be a hindrance, and keeping them safe and happy and feeling loved and valued is going to be a major problem. But really – I don't cope with my children. I live with them and love them. And whilst – yes, it's difficult and tiring at times, this is one place where my identity is rooted – so on the surface, yes, it may look like a hamster wheel, and there are many people who will look from the outside and say, yes it must be terribly this that or the other...but in five years of single parenting – it never felt like a hamster wheel, or like trying to cope.

It seems to me that when you genuinely give yourself to others, for their own sake and not for your own, you are close to the kingdom of God, and the things you worry about do not happen. Sure, we're not so naïve as to think there aren't exceptions to this – and if we interpret the sermon on the mount individualistically, it won't work. But every word and breath of this sermon assumes a community living together, being together and being human

in particular ways. Ways that require genuine, self-giving love. But that kind of love is not easy, and will include pain and confrontation and suffering – there's no denying this at any point in the sermon on the mount.

But the tragedy is, that for so many of us – genuine self giving love hurts. It means confronting who we really are. It involves exposing who we really are to others and to God and to ourselves. Much easier, to carry on like Happy Hamster, calling Jesus Lord, Lord, fixing the world for God's sake, working for justice and goodness and love – and never once climbing off the hamster wheel to worship God properly.

Seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness.