

# The noonday demon

**Weariness and despondency are seen in Christian thought not merely as an affliction, but as a sin. Fiona Gibson takes a fresh look at 'the noonday demon', as it was once known**



In the mid 2000s, one of the most popular characters in TV comedy was Catherine Tate's Lauren – the stropky schoolgirl who, if challenged, would wait a moment, raise one eyebrow, wait another moment, and then utter the immortal line, 'Am I bovvered?'

So popular did the phrase become that it could be heard in offices, classrooms and family homes all over the UK. Tate killed off Lauren in 2007, but the attitude lives on.

It lives on in the weary cynicism we feel when faced with headlines about phone hacking or rises in energy prices. It lives on in the weary confusion we feel when trying to understand government policy on state benefits, or what to do about the Middle East. It lives on in the weariness we feel when faced with the demands of work, family, church and life in general. And it shouldn't surprise us that it does.

The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote about this weariness thousands of years ago.

*'Meaningless! Meaningless!'  
says the Teacher.  
'Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless.'*

Which is just another way of saying, 'What's the point?'

Where does this disillusionment, this weariness, come from? One answer is that it's the modern manifestation of an ancient vice: *acedia*, or sloth. Medieval monks knew all about *acedia*, as it was included in the seven deadly sins, and I suggest we need to go back and learn again what it is, how it affects us, and how we can fight it. I fear that, if we don't, the toxic mix of narcissism and *acedia* that is so prevalent in our society, and even in the church, is going to do an enormous amount of damage in the coming decades.

*Acedia*, sloth, laziness. That's the progression in meaning that the word has undergone over several centuries. And laziness, while not applauded, is

hardly described as 'deadly' by most people. So what is *acedia* doing in a list of deadly sins or habits of thought and behaviour which threaten our spiritual well-being? We need to understand more about what *acedia* actually is to see how deadly it can be.

Evagrius of Pontus, a 4th century monk, wrote extensively about *acedia*. He used words such as despondency, slackness, limpness and emptiness to describe the feelings that come from *acedia*. Evagrius thought that monks were particularly prone to *acedia* in the middle of the day, hence its nickname of 'the noonday demon'.

The effects of *acedia* were many. The monk would find chanting the psalms wearisome, he would find the company of his fellow monks wearisome, he would find his physical work wearisome, and he would long to leave the monastery and go back to his former life.

At this point, you might be feeling some sympathy with the medieval

monks, and wondering why *acedia* is defined as a sin! We all know the weariness of doing the same repetitious task day after day. Dare I say it, we all sometimes know the weariness of being with the same group of people day after day. When we're in the middle of a task it can seem never-ending, and we can long for something – anything – else to think about. At that '*acedia* moment', making a coffee can seem like a wildly exciting prospect.

So why is *acedia* defined as a sin and not just an affliction? Here Thomas Aquinas is helpful. Writing in the 13th century, Aquinas saw *acedia* first and foremost as a failure to love. It sees love as a burden. It sees relationships as burdens. It isn't far from there to the realisation that *acedia* sees anything outside the self as a burden.

That's where the link with narcissism comes into play. Narcissism is self-love,

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love turned in on itself to worship the self. *Acedia* is failure to love or want to engage with anything or anyone outside the self. Together they are toxic. If left unchecked and unchallenged, they will destroy our relationships with others. They will destroy our relationships with our work, and even seek to destroy our relationship with God.

At the core of his being, God himself is other-person centred love. That intra-trinitarian love which has existed from all eternity is what defines love. Another medieval writer, Richard of St Victor, wrote that love can't be defined as love if it's aimed only at oneself. Love turned inwards is disordered love. In fact, it's not love at all.

Other-person centred love is what brought us to God in the first place. *His* other-person centred love, which flowed out in creation, redemption, justification and sanctification, brought us to him and keeps us in him.

Other-person centred love is what we are called as Christians to model in the church and to the world – for the sake of the other. So *acedia*, which sees love and relationships as a burden, is a sin to be battled because it leads us to turn in on ourselves. It causes us to draw back from engaging with the world, our neighbour and God, because all those engagements are wearisome and burdensome.

Engaging with the world is hard work. Trying, prayerfully, to come to a Christian understanding of the issues of our day and how to respond to them is hard work. Staying faithful to our calling, in whatever sphere of service that may be, is hard work. Loving the unlovely is hard work. Fighting injustice is hard work. Standing up for the gospel in a hostile society is hard work. How much easier, whispers *acedia*, not to bother. Not to be bothered. To withdraw, or run away.

*Acedia* is a sin, rather than merely an affliction, because it causes us to show a lack of trust in God's goodness. We are discontented, thinking we would feel less weary or sad if only we could change something about our circumstances. We withdraw from the world, from one another and from God, thinking that we would be happier if only we could be left alone to do our own thing.

This is not the same as clinical depression. In clinical depression, no way out can be seen. *Acedia* tempts us to think that the way to happiness is by moving away from where God

has put us, or by withdrawing from relationships altogether.

*Acedia* isn't that one-off feeling of malaise we all have occasionally. It is a combination of deep-seated frustration and resentment experienced over a long period of time, leading to a withdrawal from the perceived burden of engagement with others and with God. *Acedia* isn't bovered.

As people made in the image of God and redeemed by the grace of God, we are called to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. That's the very opposite of *acedia*.

So what can we do if we realise we have fallen prey to the noonday demon? Evagrius has some very practical advice, as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 4th.

First, pray. But not long, elaborate prayers. Pray short, intensive prayers. Set a specific goal in each task and work at it until it is finished. Meditate on scripture. Preach it to yourself, to break the vicious cycle of *acedia*-inspired despondency. Fill your mind, as the apostle Paul exhorts us, with whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Pray that you will be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

In that way, over time, and by God's grace, *acedia's* toxic grip on our minds will be loosened and we will be free live for God and for others.

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