

THERE is a frozen-food company whose trucks carry the slogan: "Because life's too short to peel carrots." But the religious life suggests that not only is there plenty of time to peel carrots, but that the peeling of carrots, when approached in the right way, brings freedom.

Strangely, perhaps, for something that looks as if it might bring with it extra pressures — even more stuff to do in even less time — the monastic rhythm of life has the power to release us from the tyranny of time-deficit.

The monastic rule of life sets priorities, and, because it knows our preference, if given the chance, for the easy way out (*mea culpa*), it anticipates our hiding places. But it also raises our sights to what may be possible. This will take — initially at least — a great deal of effort and application.

Why do we so often choose to

Monastic rhythm of life

Ian Adams draws attention to the priority of worship

live to inferior rhythms and faltering beats? The great saint Paul knew this aspect of the human predicament well. "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Romans 7.18b). Most of us, most of the time, seem to need some help to do the good thing that is within us.

There is currently a renewed and welcome interest in various disciplines in doing things at the right speed. In Philip Groning's 2006 film *Into Great Silence* — a beautiful observation of life in a Carthusian monastery — there is a wonderful

scene in which a monk prepares and cuts cloth for a habit for a new brother. There is neither undue haste, nor a wasting of time, but rather deliberate care, attention, and love for the task. The viewer experiences an unfolding sense of wonder that such a quiet undertaking can be so full of meaning.

The monastic rhythm of life cultivates a different approach to time. It redefines the task as not just a means to an end, but as something to do because it is in itself both necessary and good. Its particular

and brilliant gift is to carve out space for what is truly important.

The monastic day does not, for example, allow the flexibility to stay on at work because of a deadline. The things we are most likely to drop — prayer, silence, and stillness — are given particular attention and pride of place in the monastic diary.

On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine Office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand, and go with

utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion to frivolity. Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.
(*The Rule of St Benedict*)

When the day and the night are lived this way, it becomes clear that most of our hurrying is unnecessary, and perhaps even harmful. The monastics teach us that waiting may be a key stance in life — in their case waiting to see what, in God's care, is coming into being. A waiting stance will, of course, need cultivating. It will need work. It will require us to adopt a new rhythm.

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