

Two kinds of time

Romans 13.11

How many of you can tell the time? - apparently increasing numbers of adults can't tell the time on a clock face – they are wedded to digital timepieces. That's a bit worrying! Learning to tell the time is a very useful thing that we all learn to do when we are quite young. When we are very little, we have no idea of time - so when grown-ups say that something will be happening next week, it doesn't mean anything to us. It might as well be next year. If a Mum says to her two year-old 'We'll go to the park in an hour' it means no more than if she said 'we'll go to the park next year.'

But when we have learned to tell the time, we can use it in two ways. It means that we can see that it is *now* 3 o'clock, and time to go, or we can work out that there is a whole hour to go before we get to 3 o'clock, so we might as well get on with doing something else. And we use the word 'time' to mean both a long period, and the moment when something is to be done. Let's just see how that works out. Do you think these sayings I am about to share are about a long period of time - time that goes on – or about a precise moment of time?

There is time to do your homework later

Do you remember the time we spent in Cornwall?

Its time to go to bed.

Time Gentlemen please!

Well, let's just put those two together. If I read you a riddle, and tell you that I will give you the answer in five minutes time, that means we will have a lengthways time, and then a precise time. I could put a kitchen timer on, and it would count down that lengthways time, and when the bell rings, I would know it is now the time to give the answer. So here is the riddle:

What kind of ants tear down trees?

What kind of ants roll in mud to take their ease?

What kind of ants have four knees?

What kind of ants flap their ears in the breeze?

What kind of ants spell their name with two e's?

Sh - don't tell, it's a tease.

In the time Jesus was teaching his friends, and in the ancient world generally, there were two words for time. One was basically about on-going -time - the lengthways time we were thinking about - that was the word *χρονος* (chronos) - the word we get 'chronology and chronological' from. The other word was

καιρος (kairos) - but I can't think of any everyday words that we have derived from that. That was the word for the moment of time, the vertical one we talked about. What is interesting is that the one which seems to be much more important in the Bible is that second one - the moment of time - the decisive moment of truth, if you like. And we heard a prime example of it in today's New Testament reading, where Paul writes to the Christians in Rome - 'you know what time it is - it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep'. And in the gospels Jesus talks about a moment of time, when he would come again. So the coming of Jesus was seen as a moment of decisive time - a moment of opportunity. So Jesus often seems to be saying to people that there is something they must do *now*. He challenges people to make up their mind and act. When he sees the fishermen by the sea of Galilee, he doesn't say 'Have a think about coming to join in what I am doing - take a bit of time to mull it over' - he says 'Follow me - now!' And that pattern is typical. Meeting with Jesus was a 'now' moment for many people, a moment in time which changed their lives. Maybe one of the problems of sharing a faith which is so old is that we lose that sense of the 'now moment'. People have believed in Jesus for nearly two thousand years. We are part of a vast period of time of belief. But what happens is that each of us has to have the series of now moments which are our encounter with Jesus. In the Baptism service we say the Apostles Creed which has been said for about 1700 years at Baptisms - but we are saying it now, for us, whenever we use it. And that is why the faith is a living faith - it is about what is happening now - and about how God is relevant to us today, in the present moment. If that isn't true, then we have nothing to say, really.

I remember sending some fliers to the parents of our Church School about a parenting course we were running. The children went home at 3.00. By 4.30 I had the first call from someone wanting to book. I said something about 'Wow - you are quick off the mark' - to which the lady replied - well, you know how it is, if you don't do something right away, it doesn't get done.' And of course she is right. So often I have had various bits of paper on my desk which I ought to have dealt with ages ago, but instead of doing them right away, they have got put to one side. The chances are I shall find someone ringing and saying - did you get my letter?. We need to act right away, and not put things off. The problem is that in relation to God as much as anything else, we tend to be horizontal time people rather than vertical time people. We think we always have a period of time to get round to it, when really we need to act now.

Let me share with you a famous meditation written about sixty years ago by Abbe Michel Quoist. It is precisely about this issue of time.

"I went out, Lord. People were coming and going, Walking and running. Everything was rushing: Cars, trucks, the street, the whole town. People were rushing not to waste time. They were rushing after time, To catch up with time. To gain time.

Good-bye, Sir, excuse me, I haven't time. I'll come back. I can't wait. I haven't time. I must end this letter—I haven't time. I'd love to help you, but I haven't time. I can't accept, having no time. I can't think, I can't read, I'm swamped, I haven't time. I'd like to pray, but I haven't time.

You understand, Lord, They simply haven't the time. The child is playing, He hasn't time right now...Later on... The schoolboy has his homework to do, He hasn't time...Later on... The student has his courses, And so much work...Later on... The young married man has his new house; He has to fix it up...He hasn't time...Later on... The grandparents have their grandchildren. They haven't time...Later on... They are ill, they have their treatments, They haven't time...Later on... They are dying, they have no... Too late!...They have no more time!

And so all people run after time, Lord. They pass through life running— Hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, And they never get there. They haven't time. In spite of all their efforts They're still short of time, Of a great deal of time. Lord, you must have made a mistake in your calculations, There is a big mistake somewhere. The hours are too short. Our lives are too short.

You who are beyond time, Lord, You smile to see us fighting it. And you know what you are doing. You make no mistakes in your distribution of time to men. You give each one time to do what you want him to do. But we must not lose time, waste time, kill time, For it is a gift that you give us, But a perishable gift, A gift that does not keep.

Lord, I have time, I have plenty of time, All the time that you give me, The years of my life, The days of my life, The days of my years, The hours of my days, They are all mine. Mine to fill, quietly, calmly, But to fill completely, up to the brim, To offer them to you, that of their insipid water You may make a rich wine Such as you made once in Cana of Galilee. I am not asking you tonight, Lord, For time to do this and then that, But for your grace to do conscientiously, In the time that you give me, What you want me to do. “

And by the way, the answer to the riddle is: Eleph-ants)