
Advent is God's Time

Advent Sunday

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 27 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

How do you speak about time? I want to spend a few moments this morning listening to the language we use about time. The language we use about time is extremely revealing. It reveals whether we are powerful or powerless people. It reveals whether we really believe that God is in control of history. And it reveals what kind of a surprise we will get on judgement day.

Let's start with the way we speak about time and what it tells us about power. We think of time as being something we all experience equally - after all, when it is 10 o'clock in our own home, it is 10 o'clock in every other home in the Carolinas, in New England, in Florida, whether that home is a palace or a cardboard box. But you can find out how people relate to time by listening to the language they use.

If you are powerful, you talk about time as something you can control. The central notion of control in a consumer society is that of a financial transaction. Thus time is translated into being a commodity. Time becomes one of the most valuable things money can buy. Powerful people are defined as those who have many 'demands' on their time. Needless to say, time is always considered a limited commodity, so the language of supply and demand is quickly employed. People who are busy and important are those whose time is always in demand. Listen to the language these people use about time. They 'buy' time, as if time were something you could order on discount from the internet. They 'spend' time, as if time were some kind of currency of exchange. They 'use' time as if time were some kind of garden implement. Sometimes they 'invest' time, often a great deal of time. On other occasions they 'put time aside', as if it were a pre-wrapped chocolate collection one kept handy for the next batch of trick-or-treaters on Hallowe'en. 'Don't "lose" precious time' they tell you, but if they like you, they will 'find' time to see you. Every time they look for a new technological innovation, their first question is whether it will 'save' time. It's never clear how they 'spend' the time these gadgets have 'saved'. What you must never do is 'waste' their time. Just to remind you that they are important, and that they are important just to the degree that they can control time, they demonstrate their ability to calibrate time, making some time more important and valuable than others - their time, of course. Hence the expression 'quality' time. Quality time is presumably time you buy at Harris Teeter rather than Wall-Mart. In other words, a better class of time, as if one were speaking of a better class of coffee or breakfast cereal. All of these idioms for engaging time culminate when the breathless executive reminds the lackadaisical staff that 'time is money'. Now at last it makes sense to talk of saving, wasting, spending, investing and putting aside, for time is money. And money gets you every commodity an economy of limited resources has to offer - hence the language of buying and quality.

By contrast there is another group of people. This group would love to be busy and important, but for a variety of reasons they feel that they aren't. Their division from the first group is not so much about wealth or income, or even educational attainment or physical prowess. It is about the fact that they are on the supply side of the time economy. Their time is not in hot demand. It is not in short supply. Because they are not in a hurry, they are considered by the first group to be 'wasting' time. There's no doubt that they are 'losing precious time' in life's rat race. By any standards of measuring time as money or as the commodity money can buy, these people are poor. But the irony is, they have an abundance of what the powerful people seem constantly to be short of - time. Nonetheless they very often see the world as the powerful see it, and thus see their situation as a bad one. They quickly come to see time as an enemy, and frequently use battle-language. Time is 'against' them, or 'presses in on' them; it 'weighs heavy' on their lives. They seem to be failing the 'test' of time. The saddest language is that which speaks of 'killing' time, since those who set out to kill time almost always lose the battle.

And that brings us to Advent Sunday. Advent celebrates two things. It celebrates the most important news about the past, and it celebrates the most important news about the future. The most important news about the past is that Christ has come. The most important news about the future is that Christ is coming back.

When Christ came, God showed us everything we needed to know about his character, our friendship with him, how that friendship has been restored and how we can keep it. When Christ comes again, God will deal with everything in his creation that is not yet ready to come into his glory. And now we live in the meantime. The curious thing is that no one seems to be too happy with the meantime. The powerful people say 'Life's too short'. The powerless people say, 'How long, O Lord, how long?'

But what if we believed God had given us just the right length of time to do just exactly the things he calls us to do – and that when that time was up, he would do the rest. Several times in the gospels Jesus predicts that there will be a dramatic climax to the story of the world. At the end of the world, God finally intervenes and brings justice and peace to his whole creation.

We tend to regard talk of the end of the world as a frightening thing. Of course, for those who treat time as a commodity, the end of the world is a frightening thing: what will happen to all that precious time they've 'saved'? But for everybody else, the end of the world is tremendously good news, because it reminds us that God is in control of history - and that even if we keep on getting it wrong, he will finally make all things right.

If God is in control of history, we do not need to be unduly anxious about the end of the world. I remember when Ronald Reagan became President in 1980 I was worried to the point of sleeplessness because I assumed this meant there was going to be a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and we were all going to die. But the Christian belief in God almighty is a belief that if we succeeded in destroying the world, God could simply bring on another world, like a television chef bringing out of the oven a dish he or she had prepared earlier. That doesn't mean we should be casual about blowing up this precious world: it just means we shouldn't fall into thinking our sin can fundamentally stand in the way of God's providence.

What Jesus does by showing us the end of the world is to take time out of our hands. He says 'If you're going to treat time as an enemy or as a commodity I'm going to take time away from you. I'll give you back a new time, but you must treat this time differently. Stop taking about time as if it were in short supply. It's not part of the economy in that clumsy way. You must now treat time as a gift and as a friend.'

Time is a gift, because we live in God's time, not our own. We can never 'buy' time, because time can never belong to us. It always still belongs to God. Time is 'on our side'. We can't buy time with God: God doesn't do deals. We must learn to enjoy God's time. Time is the word for the existence that God continues to give us and that we can never own. Do you really believe God will give you all the time to do what he really wants you to do? Does your life reflect that? Or are you constantly trying to squeeze more into the day than the day can hold, seeking to hold back the waters of time through endeavoring to preserve your youthful looks, rushing around proclaiming to the world by your busyness that God is on holiday and you're filling in for him? If time is a gift, time is on your side. Time is not a commodity. It is not in short supply. You may not have all the time you want. But you have all the time you need.

And time is a friend. Time is a friend because we have nothing to fear from what God has in store for us. The face we see on the judgement seat will be the face we have seen on the cross and on the day of resurrection. Judgement Day may bring some surprises, but it will bring no shocks. We have seen God's character and it's not going to change. If time is our friend, we can enjoy time with those who do not promise to make the world a better place. We can be with prisoners, with young children, with the very elderly - for that's where God spends his time. If time is a gift, we can enjoy that gift with all sorts of people who don't contribute to our status - with the very sick, with the homeless, with the mentally ill. When the Church is full of people like this, it is evidence that the church is living in a new time. This is what we mean by the 'kingdom breaking in'. The kingdom of God breaks in to our community when people start living as if God is king. We will be judged by our attitude to time, for the way we see time is a measure of our faith. Every bit of time you spend this week with a powerless person is part of this Church's proclamation of gospel hope.

If there is one social group who expose the link between our attitude to time and our attitude to God, it is people with severe learning disabilities. Such people simply take up a tremendous amount of time. And it is time that it is very difficult to render in money or commodity language, because many such people don't seem to progress, if progress means become like the rest of the population. It's no use being sentimental about such people, because many are exasperating company in the way they dismantle all of society's presuppositions

about logic, manners, and private space. The tendency of our society is to treat such people in the same kind of way we treat time. Either we treat people with learning disability as a commodity, needing to be housed and cared for and somehow dealt with. Or we treat such a person as an enemy, a person whose life should if possible be prevented from coming into existence, or at least be prevented from unduly damaging the lives around it. . But our task as Christians is to come to see such a person as a gift and a friend. A gift, because in their life God is giving us something we did not have before, someone we need to be everything God calls us to be. And a friend, because in finding in relating to this person we have nothing to fear, we discover that our true hope lies not in our striving but in God's grace. If you do one thing for God this Advent, spend some time with a person with a severe learning disability. The way you relate to this person will epitomize what you believe about time.

It's easy to slip into old ways, and treat time and people as commodities for our own advancement, or enemies in the way of our freedom. But gathering together in worship as we are doing now is a constant reminder that we are living in God's time, not our own. By the standards of the powerful worship, like being with a person with a severe learning disability, is a right old waste of time. But we're here because we believe that in Christ God has come, and is coming back. We're here because time is no longer against us, and it is no longer in short supply. We're here because there is simply nothing better in life than to worship God with others who love him like you do. And if it takes all the time in the world, it doesn't matter - because it's God's time.