

Now may I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we get close to the Advent season, our readings have already taken on a very Advent-y feel. There's a theme that I want to explore, which is in the readings today, which is a very powerful Advent theme, and that's the theme of time. Advent invites us to think about the complex notion of time, especially with its emphasis on the end of time. Paul in our epistle begins today's reading by saying, "Now, concerning the times," and he goes on to talk about the day of the Lord, "Which will come like a thief in the night." The Old Testament reading from Zephaniah also refers to the great day of the Lord, which he says is near and hastening fast. The Psalmist, too, talks about time. The 12th verse that the choir sang of the Psalm was this, "Teach us to number our days." As I've looked at that Gospel reading in this Advent context, it too, I think, has a temporal aspect.

The story was reputed to be Mrs. Thatcher's favorite bit of the Bible. No doubt she focused on the economic aspects of the story, which she read as a story of monetary investment. However, I noticed when looking at it this week, that the master returned to the servants after a long time. If he wanted to see how they'd invested their money, he could have come back the next week or the following month, but he came back, we're told, a long time later, I think because he wanted to find out how they'd invested their time as well as his money.

The question that he's asking isn't just, "What have you done with the talents?" But, "How have you used the time that you've had?" Time has value. It's a rich and valuable resource. The 19th century naturalist and Harvard professor, Louis Agassiz, was approached to give a lecture at a very prestigious institution. He declined, much to the surprise of those who were asking him. So they went back and said, "Look, we'll pay you a lot of money to give this lecture." And he said, "Well, that's no inducement to me. I can't afford to waste my time making money."

There's something about Agassiz's attitude, which I

admire. You can make more money, but you can never make more time. Time as a resource is non-renewable and non-transferable. You cannot store it, slow it up, hold it up, divide it up, or give it up. You can't hoard it up or save it for a rainy day. When it's lost, it's unrecoverable. When you kill time, remember there's no resurrection when it comes to time. Time, as I've said, is a complex notion. It's kept philosophers busy for centuries. Different religious traditions have different attitudes to time, and I would say that Christianity itself has different understandings of time. Both of them, because I think there's two distinct streams, both of them can be seen in today's reading.

That's what I want to do with the rest of our time, to draw out these two complementary notions of time that we have in our readings. First, there's the obvious emphasis that is placed on time being a limited resource, of it having an end. This is the thing that gets most attention in Advent. We're not even in Advent yet, but it's coming across, this sense of the coming day of the Lord. Or as we've sung in that hymn, "Time like an ever rolling stream", bearing all our years away. Paul says to the Thessalonians, "The day of the Lord is coming. It's coming like a thief in the night, when no one expects it." Paul here is developing a strong Old Testament theme. We see it in that reading from Zephaniah, "The great day of the Lord is near. Near and hastening fast." That sense of time rushing on.

Time is understood in this sense to be moving forward to a goal. Time and history will have an end, and God will establish a new kingdom, and that new kingdom will be a new beginning. Hence, the need to be ready and prepared for the end, which is to come. The fact that there will be a day of reckoning is what lies behind Jesus' parable. Whilst it can appear a challenging message, this view of time reminds us that time is not just drifting along aimlessly, time isn't going around in circles. There will be an end. Suffering and injustice does not go unnoticed. God will one day act to put things right. The new kingdom will be established. Ends are useful, they remind us of that. They give us a perspective from which to review our own lives and priorities. As Steven Covey says, "We should always begin with the end in mind."

Now I'm not gonna say anymore about ends or this view of time, as you'll be hearing plenty of that in this Advent season, as it comes. Let me turn our attention to another view of time, less clear, perhaps, that's also present in our readings. Hear this from the Psalm, "For a thousand days in your sight are like yesterday when it is past." Here's a reference to time, which is not rushing on. Time in God's sight is less past and future, and more present. The Bible isn't to be read simply as pointing forward to a great day, which is to come. There are lots of invitations to savor the present. That's why we have lots of encouragements in the Bible, especially in the Psalm, to be still. Or as the Old Testament reading begins, "Be silent before the Lord." The Hebrew word there is "be hushed", which is a good word. If we're hushed and still, we can truly savor the moment, be present with a God who is present with us by His Spirit.

Jesus is a great example of this. There's no reference in the Gospels, I think, despite all the wonders that he did, all his teaching, and all the amazing things he did. I don't think there's a reference, ever, to Jesus rushing or hurrying. He taught his followers to consider the lilies of the field. There weren't roses in first century Palestine. If there were, I think he might have said, "Slow down and smell the roses." It's the same thought. Pay attention to the moment that you're in. Jesus might never have hurried, but I reckon most of us do. I certainly can identify closely with the country song that goes, "I'm in a hurry to get things done. I rush and rush until life's no fun. All I really gotta do is live and die, but I'm in a hurry and I don't know why."

We need to practice what theologians call the sacrament of the present moment. We're called to pay attention. Pay attention to the God who is with us, to the beautiful world that God has made. To God's presence in those people we meet along life's journey. We're to be attentive. Remember the beatitudes where Jesus says, "Enjoy today. Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow has enough worries of its own. Live in the present." Part of that wisdom of time is knowing what each moment is for. It's about seeing the opportunity that each

moment presents. There's a famous passage about time in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, which begins, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under Heaven. Everything is beautiful in its time." Now this strand of Christian thought, of course, echoes some things that you can find in the eastern traditions.

Hear this, from the Sanskrit, "Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life, in its brief course lies all the varieties and realities of your existence. The bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendor of beauty. For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision. But today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope." Or to put it more simply, yesterday was history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is the gift of God, that's why it's called the present. This view of time, which T.S. Eliot called, "the patent of timeless moments," is becoming increasingly popular. I'm sure many of you have read the work of Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*. His views are attractive to modern ears, because it shrinks the universe. We don't have to think on a big scale. All that matters is paying attention to the now. As Tolle says, "There is no judgment of the now."

There's something very good about this. Too many of us live in the false belief that there's a slower day coming, that there will be more time tomorrow. We're called to enjoy the now of the present moment. I once met someone who longed for immortality. He was flirting with the idea of saving some of his body parts with cryogenic freezing. The funny thing was that he didn't know what to do with himself on a wet Sunday afternoon. There's a balance to be struck between the Bible's two views of time. I'm sorry to say that George Harrison, who wrote some wonderful tunes, didn't get the balance right. He said this, "It's being here now that's important. There's no past and there's no future. Time is a very misleading thing. All there is ever is the now. We can gain experience from the past, but we can't re-live it. And we can hope for the future, but we don't know if there is one."

The thing is, George, that with God we do know

there's a future. That our God who was our hope in ages past is our hope for years to come. It's true that being in the now is important. But we also have a stake in God's future, in His kingdom, which is to come, which will be a glorious new beginning. In God, we know there is a future, which is why we need to balance our understanding of the importance of the now with the kingdom, which is to come. We balance the now and the not yet. That's the tension that's striking in the Gospels, and there throughout the whole of Scripture. When the Psalmist prays, "Teach us to number our days," I think he's saying, "Help us to make good and proper use of our time. Help us to enjoy the now, while anticipating that great day, which is to come." Amen.