

In recent weeks, we've seen how in this time of pandemic, various classic Advent themes have come into sharp relief. So we're going to end this very Adventy Advent by looking at the classic Advent theme of time. Time has felt different in this pandemic. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's completely lost track of time. The days have merged into one another, now the months have merged into one another. I've realized the truth in what Lenin once said, "There are decades where nothing happens and weeks when decades happen."

Psychologists have started to explore this new phenomenon of pandemic time. The most striking thing about pandemic time is that we experience it in different ways. Ruth Ogden, who researched the topic has found out that for 20% of people, time has stayed the same. But for 40% of people, time seems to have speeded up. And then, another 40% of people feel that time has slowed down. And this sounds about right to me.

Some of us are stuck at home with not much going on, like my friend who sent me a Christmas letter this year. He normally writes terribly long, detailed, far too long actually, letters detailing all that happened on his travels and all the things that have happened in a year. This year, he wrote a very, very brief Christmas letter. It just simply said, "This year's Christmas letter is shorter than normal because we've been stuck at home, not seeing anyone, and not been anywhere. Happy Christmas. Love Fred."

Others though, have been at home and their home hasn't just been a home, it's also been a workplace and a school. As the writer, Vanatech Raul has put it, "Without the homogenizing forces of communal life, our individual experiences of pandemic time are being shaped by the particularities of wildly variable individual situations." And it's good to be reminded that time is shaped. It can be felt and experienced differently.

We can get used to thinking that time is just there. We take it for granted. But this pandemic reminds us that there are different ways of understanding, of interpreting time. The Greeks, for example, had different words for time. They talked about Kronos, from which we get the word chronology, which is just marking time, like we've been marking every seven days in Advent by lighting a candle. Then they had the word Kairos, which doesn't refer to a particular amount of

time, but simply to the right time. It's the right moment in time that is a Kairos moment.

Then they talk too of eons. Great periods of significant time. And the Bible too has a distinct way of understanding time. And there are some great understandings on the subject in the psalm that we had read today, Psalm 90. And I want to look at that. The first thing that the Psalmist reminds us of there is that God is outside of time. "From everlasting to everlasting, you are God," says the Psalmist. God is not bound by time. "For a thousand years in God's sight," says the Psalmist, "are like yesterday, when it is past." God is not bound by time, but we know that he is active in time. We see that supremely in the events we celebrate this week, in the events of Christmas. The creator God who is outside of time in the form of the baby Christ child, enters into our human story.

The second point the Psalmist is makes is that whilst God is eternal and not bound by time, we most definitely are. "Our years," says the Psalmist, "Come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are 70 years or perhaps 80 if we are strong," he says. "Even then their span is only toil and trouble, they are soon gone..." Our life is fleeting. The Psalmist compares our life to grass that is renewed in the morning, and in the evening fades and withers. Our time is limited.

Time has value. It's a rich and valuable resource. The 19th century Harvard Professor, Louis Agassiz, was once approached by the emissary of a very distinguished and learned society and invited to address its members. Agassiz declined the invitation saying that lectures of this kind took up too much time that could be devoted instead to learning and writing. The man persisted and said that the society was prepared to pay handsomely for his lecture. "That's no inducement to me," said Agassiz. "I can't afford to waste my time making money." And there's something about Agassiz attitude which I admire. You can make more money, but you can't ever make more time.

Time is a resource that is non-renewable and non-transferrable. You cannot store it, slow it up, divide it up, hold it up, or give it up. You can't hoard it up and save it for a rainy day. When it's lost, it's unrecoverable. And when you kill time, remember that it has no resurrection. One of the challenges of Advent has always been to ask ourselves the question, are we

investing our time in the right places? In the places we want to be investing it?

Our reading from the Psalm ends with the Psalmist saying to God, "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." And I think that counting our days is the same as making our days count. There's a strong emphasis in the Bible of living in the present moment, what Eckhart Tolle calls The Power of Now. We see that in the most famous Bible passage on the subject of time, from the book of Ecclesiastics. "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven," the preacher writes. "Time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up." And so it goes on.

And this emphasis on the importance of the now is found too in Jesus's teaching in the gospels. He says to his disciples, "Don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Live in the moment he's saying, make the most of now. Of course, that's easier said than done, and a lesson we all need to learn. I once met a very rich man who longed for immortality, and he was exploring cryogenic freezing so that various parts of his body could be stored so that they might be revived at some point in the future when the technology had been invented. But the funny thing was, he didn't know what to do with himself on a wet Sunday afternoon.

Counting the days, cultivating a good use of our time is learning what each moment is for. However, I must also say that there's something very important about time that's missing in the Psalm. Something that's not in the Psalms and not anywhere in the Old Testament. What's missing is spelt out by George Harrison, who said, "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 relive it. And we can hope for the future, but we don't know if there is one.

What the Psalmist and the Beatle lack is a hope for the future - the sense of an end. And the genius of Jesus's teaching is that he holds in balance the importance of now, and also our hope for the future. The anticipation of a kingdom which is yet to come. Our gospel reading from Mark speaks of the yet unknown day and hour when the son of man will come on clouds of glory and a new kingdom will be established. Jesus's teaching has a

strong emphasis on the now and an equally strong emphasis on the future. He has a strong sense of an end.

Advent is a season to remember that we must never lose sight of the fact that time and history will come to an end. Jesus will return to establish his kingdom. That's the perspective from which we view our own lives and world. Time is not just a series of unconnected moments. It has the shape of a beginning, a middle and an end. The God who created the world in the beginning will establish his kingdom at the end.

The significance of the Bible and the story it tells, is that it shapes time. It helps us to understand our now by locating it between the beginning of God's creation and the end of the coming of the kingdom. That's the shape in which we're invited to see and understand our lives. And because of that, we can talk of time having meaning and purpose. The point of now is to serve then.

In the season of Advent, we remember that the God who came in the person of Jesus Christ is to come again on a day that is yet to be revealed. And on that great day, time will cease to have meaning. There will be no more time. In God's new Kingdom of Heaven, a day will be as a thousand years. And it's in that context that I'll end with a mention of Hell. I don't think that we're to understand Hell as having a temporal aspect. It's not a place of eternal, ongoing punishment. Hell is all that will not be taken up in God's timeless, eternal kingdom, on that great day when God will execute his judgment.

It's rather fitting to end Advent 2020 on a dark note. Next time we gather we'll light the central candle of our Advent wreath, which symbolizes that at the right time, God came in Jesus Christ as the light of the world, and that light cast out the darkness. As St. John says, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." Amen.