

## About Time - Sermon for December 31st 2023

I'd like to begin if I may with a confession. I began thinking and preparing for this sermon way back in August, but I'd left the final writing of it until this last week. And then Storm Gerret hit and the Scottish roads worked against us. So I ran out of time in doing the final polishing I would have liked. But in a sense this ties in with the theme that has always been set for this sermon: about time passing and how we deal with time. So here goes!

I think congratulations are in order. We've almost reached the end of 2023! And what a year it has been, hasn't it? As we embark on another new year in just a few hours' time, we'll be taking with us many memories from this one. Whether these are times of celebration and enjoyment, or of pain and loss - or perhaps a mixture of both - one thing is certain. 2023 is coming to an end tonight and 2024 will bring its own new set of experiences for each of us. So today we'll focus on the 'small' topic of time. We'll look at two different forms of time that appear in the gospels and how this reminds us of Emmanuel - that God is with us and will be with us throughout 2024 and throughout our time..

In Cambridge there is a mythical monster that haunts its streets. You might have seen it before. It's called a "Chronophage" – from the Greek "chronos" (meaning "time") and "phage" (meaning "eater") and it portrays a mythical, insect-like creature that sits on top of a magnificent golden clock. Fierce and forbidding, the Chronophage is a creature that consumes time by walking steadily above a huge clock face, pulling the minutes along with a rocking motion, its jaws snapping shut every 60 seconds as it swallows up another minute. Yet occasionally, the creature seems to play a trick, speeding up or slowing down the passage of time as well.

Each of us experiences time in different ways. For some, 2023 will seem to have gone by in a heartbeat and here we are again, about to enter another year. For others of us, it will have been a slow and difficult time and you can't wait for a new year to begin. But come what may, measured time progresses inexorably forward. How we measure time is taken from the Greek word Chronos. This is the measurable clock time of seconds, minutes, hours and days. It's time that you can count and measure. From Chronos we get our own words such as chronological, chronicle, chronic and chronometer. The Greeks liked to personify just about everything, and the Greek god "chronos" was depicted as "Old Father Time" – a weary, bent-backed old man with a long grey beard, carrying a scythe and an hourglass. His resemblance to the Grim Reaper is not accidental.

You might have spotted something unusual about today's gospel reading. It's extraordinary in how ordinary it is and lacking in the spiritual elements like angels, bright stars and visiting wise men. In some ways nothing much happens. We have the shepherds, spurred on by their meeting with the angels, to visit Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. After telling all they could about what they had seen, they return back to their ordinary life as shepherds. In the same way, the passage ends with a very common event for Jewish boys, when Jesus was circumcised on his eighth day. Here is Jesus, our Emmanuel, inhabiting ordinary time. And we're given only a few glimpses into how his life was over the next thirty years. Yet for much of his life, Jesus lived in this ordinary chronos time, experiencing life and death, sharing in the messiness of daily routines and life around him.

For some of us, 2024 might be a very ordinary year. Life will continue very much as it has over these last few years. Or the problems or issues we faced in 2023 will continue just the same in 2024. Whatever we face in our ordinary lives, the reality is that Emmanuel, God is with us. The God in Jesus who lived within our chronos time of everyday life. And God is with us in the mundane and the ordinary tasks we face. There is a strong Celtic tradition of seeing God in the everyday tasks, that God is with us in the simplest things we do. It's as we experience God in our daily routine that we discover the God of everyday time. As Oswald of Northumbria said many years ago in the 7th Century, 'This day is your gift to me. I take it, Lord, from your hand and thank you for the wonder of it.' Jesus, our Emmanuel, God is with us in the everyday routine of our lives.

### ***Kairos***

But there is also another word used for time in the Bible, that's a little trickier to pin down. And that's called Kairos. It comes from the name for the Greek God Caerus or Kairos. Kairos was depicted in a different way to Chronos: as a young man – possessing only one lock of hair. People were supposed to grasp this lock as he rushed by, grasping the opportunity for change.

Kairos time is very different. It's qualitative. Part of its meaning relates to a decisive moment of opportunity.

It is mentioned several times in the gospels, such as the verse in Mark 1.15 when Jesus announces at the beginning of his ministry that 'The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' On one level, kairos is similar to saying Carpe Diem, or Seize the Day. We look for the opportunities that we encounter in life. The shepherds in our gospel reading had encountered God in a profound way. They hurry off to see Jesus, risking leaving behind their livelihoods, their flock of sheep, in search of Jesus.

When I was preparing for this sermon, I stumbled across something called The Kairos Document written by a group of churches in 1985. It's a long 400 page document and I admit I only read parts of it. One of the greatest examples of kairos at work. Not sure how good your knowledge of history is now. Written by a group of churches in South Africa and its message was a clarion call for the church to take a lead in a year when apartheid was showing its nastiest side in several massacres.

What opportunities might there be for us to see kairos at work in our country and the world? And what part might we play in bringing the love of Emmanuel - God with us into our community and our world?

The "kairos" moments and the "kairos" opportunities we face in 2024 may well touch on issues like what is God calling the church to be and what is God calling this church to do in the future? And with this in mind, it's important to ask – are we a community of people who simply gather each Sunday with good memories to celebrate – or are we a community of people who are willing to listen to the stirring of the spirit, who are ready to explore new initiatives and who are prepared, where necessary, to embrace change and to be the church in new, creative and even uncomfortable ways?

## **Spirituality**

But there is another meaning to the word kairos and something that the Franciscan priest and writer Richard Rohr calls 'deep time'. He explains kairos as the fullness of time, those 'moments' when everything clicks. It's when we realise that no matter what happens in chronos time, we inhabit a life that is already fully here and now. Emmanuel, God is with us now in this present moment.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, church worship begins with a short statement to the effect that – in this act – we are moving beyond chronological time to an intersection with God's time. In other words, in worship we are entering a time that cannot be measured, a time that cannot be consumed, a time that cannot be lost or stolen, a time that cannot be subverted or overturned by the circumstances of this world. For here worship is a coming into the presence of the eternal God who cannot be contained, who cannot be defined or who cannot be limited by the "chronos" or its associated devouring creatures.

In our gospel reading we see how the shepherds experience God in an extraordinary way when the angels appear to them. They go back to their ordinary lives profoundly changed, telling all those they meet that Emmanuel, God is with us. And we hear how Mary also treasures up all these things that have happened and ponders them in her heart. This is "kairos". This is time not defined by chronology. This is time that cannot be measured. This is time that cannot be taken away from us, be swallowed up or be devoured by the circumstances that we face in the world.

## **Conclusion**

As we live our chronological lives in 2024, we have the promise that Emmanuel, the God of time itself is with us. Whatever we face in our daily chronological lives, God is here with us and we can experience this love daily. There might also be kairos moments for us and for our church. How will we be able to share God's love or to act for change in our world during this new year? Or perhaps we can learn how to develop that deep time in prayer and contemplation in 2024 and experience Emmanuel, God is with us in a new way. Perhaps this week, as we make new year resolutions or plan ahead for the new year, we can also think about how we might rediscover Emmanuel: God is with us in a new way. Whatever we experience in 2024, there is a certainty that we can hold on to: that Emmanuel, God is with us and will remain with us in the present and the future.

Let's pray: Lord of all time, you make all things new. You bring hope alive in our hearts and cause our spirits to be born afresh. Thank you for this new year ahead, for all the potential it holds. Be with us loving God through all that 2024 will bring to us and to our world. Help us to see the kairos moments where we can act for good in our world and the kairos moments when we can go deeper into our knowledge and love for you. For you are the God within and beyond time. You are our Emmanuel. God is with us.

Amen

**Hamish Bruce - 31/12/23**