Sermon – 3rd Before Lent: Time

Over the next few weeks as we move towards and into Lent, I am going to be preaching three related sermons on faithful stewardship: the first on the faithful stewardship of our time, then talents, then money.

In their different ways each of these themes force us to confront our relationship with God. How we think about stewardship will reflect how we think about God and the part God and faith plays in our life. There is a wide range of responses amongst faithful churchgoers here: from those for whom faith is a facet of our culture that appeals to us all the way through to faith being the very essence of our being; the driving force of our waking hours.

So, let me begin today with some thoughts about the faithful stewardship of our time.

I could spend the next few minutes enjoying a fascinating conversation with myself about the nature of time – whether it is linear as we experience it or whether it is more multi-dimensional. Enjoyable though that would be for me, I’m going to resist this philosophical temptation, and explore the relationship between faith and time very much as we experience it in our day to day lives.

And so, for me the first question must be this: whose time is it.

Scripture is quite clear that time – as with all of life – is a divine gift, entrusted to us as a means of glorifying God. No aspect of life, no aspect of our use of our time, is outside of this gift.

It follows therefore, that it is far too simplistic to consider some of our time as for God, and some of our time for ourselves or for others. For the faithful Christian the whole of our experience of time must belong to God for God is the originator of all things. As we read in Chronicles and sometimes pray in church: *All things come from you and of your own do we give you.*

Acknowledging that all of time is God’s, then how we use the time allotted to us will reflect our understanding of God’s place in our life. And this is where things become a little more complicated. For if we misunderstand the relationship between our life and God’s place in it, then we will easily be led astray and find ourselves overwhelmed by guilt because we feel we don’t do enough for God.

Devoting our entire life to God is the vocation of every Christian. But this is not to say that we should be devoting our entire life to the church, to prayer, to good causes or to others, with no space for ourselves at all.

Jesus came (so we are reminded in John 10.10) so that we might know fullness of life, not fullness of diaries.

And fullness of life means joy, pleasure, fun, quiet, peace, excitement, company, friendships and a host of other life experiences and emotions – as well as the rewards that come from giving ourselves to God and to others.

So, one question to ask ourselves is this: am I living a spiritually, healthy and balanced life?

I know of no better way to prepare for the day than to pray. And I know of no better way of progressing through the day than to keep praying. And no better way of ending the day than in prayer.

There is nothing monastic or formalised about praying your way through the day. Quietly offering to God the activity of each day as you begin and complete each task is soul forming; it helps shape us as disciples of Christ and whether you begin this when you are five or ninety five makes no difference – it is the sincerity of our prayer life that matters.

Personalities vary enormously of course and some find it naturally easier – or more necessary - to take time out than others. As an introvert I cannot run from one task to the other without a break. In fact, I broke off writing this sermon half way through to watch Pointless. If you don’t pace yourself you will simply make yourself ill, and God has enough trouble looking after the sick of the world without over enthusiastic Christians adding unnecessarily to their number.

At the same time, if your Christian life only consists of church attendance, then something has gone awry. For churchgoing alone doth not a Christian make…

It’s all about balance – finding a healthy way to balance your commitments to church alongside all your other commitments, and ensuring that all your commitments taken together are undertaken for the glory of God.

Our gospel reading this morning begins with two of the most powerful analogies known to us in the Christian tradition – salt and light. Salt and light are surprisingly similar in that both bring into the open that which is otherwise hidden – depth of flavour in the case of salt and all that is obscure – good and bad - in the case of light.

This is the Christian vocation. To bring to the fore the good news of God’s Kingdom of truth, mercy, justice and peace.

But just as both salt and light are susceptible to losing salinity or being covered by a lampshade, so the impact of a disciple can be watered down by secular preoccupations that erode the transformative power of the gospel in the follower’s heart, mind and voice.

But that’s not the only warning that Jesus offers. He then goes on to stress that obedience to the law is quite insufficient as means of entering God’s Kingdom. A higher righteousness is called for, a higher standard than mere conformity to the expectations of tradition and practice.

On this the modern church has much to reflect. Those who attended the open conversations held by the Diocese this week will grasp what I mean. This is a difficult time for the Church of England as we reflect on the reality of having fewer resources to sustain our tradition than in past generations.

This will lead to shift in our priorities as churches with less emphasis on those aspects of our tradition that have historically characterised or defined Anglicanism and a far greater emphasis on the expression of our faith in our day to day relationships. I have no doubt that the future will see a downplaying of the importance of what we do on Sunday mornings and a considerable increase in the importance of how our life speaks to the communities amongst whom we live Monday-Saturday.

Whether this is exciting or disturbing, whether this induces anxiety or enthusiasm will vary enormously amongst us.

What is true, is that we are all being called to examine afresh what it means to be a Christian 24/7, 365 days of the year. It’s not about being busier and busier, more and more exhausted. It’s not about doing more and more things in, around and for the church. But it is about a more intentional approach to our spiritual life, to our journey towards holiness, to being Christ-like in all our relationships, contexts, communities in which we live, relax and work. This will almost certainly mean stopping doing some things that look like church, in order to spend more time, simply being God’s Christian presence in the world. Please commit this to prayer and listen carefully for God’s leading.

Amen.