

A new thing — or new to me - entered my consciousness last week that made me think about how we spend our time. This new thing was Black Friday. This is an import from the United States where the day after the public holiday of Thanksgiving people these days "make the bridge" between Thursday and the weekend by taking the Friday off as well. And, to parody the great Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that people with a day off following a day's enforced bonding with their family must be entitled to a day's shopping and an opportunity for a television to fall on their heads during a tussle with a fellow shopper. Or at least that seemed to be a key feature of the coverage of this year's Black Friday on the 28th November. British shoppers did not exercise any of their famed reserve at this introduction from across the Atlantic, but literally leapt at it and at anyone getting in their way of a good deal on consumer durables. If all this passed you by and you have no idea what I am talking about, then well done!

What went through my mind as I read about Black Friday and saw certain images such as a fight over a rather large television in Asda was about as I said "spending time." Time like money and energy or any other finite commodity is something that can be used up- "spent." And how we choose to spend our time will depend on how we see this particular commodity. The time of our lives. What is it for? What does it mean? Life, the universe, everything.

Each Advent we are encouraged to take stock of some of these questions in our own lives. We do not need the season of Advent to prompt these questions though— they are the classic three o'clock in the morning ones that are pushed down by the coming of dawn but never quite go away.

Throughout human history responses to these questions have fallen into broadly two camps. One that this is all there is, when the party is over the party is over "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Another that this life is only a part or a glimpse of the greater reality of a time to come. These responses are hard though to categorise as simply good or bad, bad or good. A person living entirely for the day might well decide that every action they make counts and may spend their lives not in pleasing themselves- eating drinking etc - but in helping and pleasing others. In the same way a person believing this life to be only a pale shadow of glory to come might not value human life very highly at all. We do not I think have to stretch out minds very far to find recent examples of this.

The tensions between these two positions then are not hard to imagine. These tensions are the context of our reading from the Second Letter of Peter. The young church is being seriously disrupted by those who are very vigorously "living for the day". While most of the early Christians are awaiting Christ's Second Coming, a few are dismissive of Christ's promised return and are mocking the faithful who are living holy lives waiting for his coming. The writer's message is not to be distracted by this but to continue in lives of holiness and godliness remembering that our time is not God' s time and that a thousand years are but a day. The quality of our days should not be dependent on their quantity.

The same tension is in our Old Testament reading. The prophet Isaiah in the beautiful passage we heard read today addresses his hearers with two messages from God. One recognises the desolation of human existence "All people are grass, the grass withers the flower fades". The other is the matchless message of consolation "Comfort, O comfort my people says your God." For although indeed the grass withers and the flower fades "the word of our God will stand forever."

And it is this word of comfort and of promise that is echoed in the opening of the Gospel of St. Mark. That a voice crying in the wilderness will prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist preaches repentance for forgiveness of sins and points to the one who is to come. Jesus, the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah who will baptise not with water but with the Spirit of his saving and life-giving love.

At Christmas the God for whom a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day enters human time and history. On a day in real time and for thirty three years of our time Jesus was born and lived on earth. This is what the incarnation means. Human time was and is inhabited and redeemed by God. For the reality is that human life and time is brief. But this does not mean it has no value. Its brevity and its fragility is not a reason for either desperately filling each minute with activity nor seeing it as merely the waiting room for what is next. It is both the glory and the glimpse. It is like the kingdom of God itself — now and not yet.

For the value our lives have is not how we might measure it or value it but how God does. And the message of the incarnation, of Christmas and Easter is that all human life, every short day, is held in the highest place in his heart. It is the word Good Friday says to Black Friday. That what might seem broken and meaningless is what he came to earth not just to see but *to be* for us

What is our response to this? To wait patiently for his coming, to live lives of holiness and godliness is not a life-choice but a life-change. Or rather a change of heart to see ourselves to know ourselves and our time through his eyes. One where each day truly matters and is worth a thousand years. Beginning each day by noticing this changes our perspective. Today we relaunch this little booklet: The St Peter's Cycle of Daily Prayer for Church and Parish. Many of us are familiar with it. It has now been revised by Margaret and David. Each day there are a set of prayer intentions for people and places both here and in the wider world and a few simple prayers. This Advent if it is not your pattern to begin your day placing it and all it holds in God's hands then this little booklet might be very helpful indeed.

All it will take, of course, is to spend some time. Many years ago I listened rather irritably to a sermon like this and said afterwards that at that particular time in my life I was too busy to pray in this way. The person I spoke to replied that it was funny but that she found that she was far too busy not to pray....

Amen

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