

Corona Season (17.2.21)
Ash Wednesday

TIME AND ETERNITY

*He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.*

ECCLESIASTES 3.11

Some years ago, Helen and I went to the garden centre to buy some rocks for our rockery. The labels did not give the usual description, e.g.: York stone, slate, granite, and so on, but described them by their geological period: Jurassic, Cambrian, etc., each with its age. We chose some stones described as 'Mezozoic' – 200 million years old! I began to look at garden rocks in a new way: it seemed as though they had existed almost since time began; they put me in context, a reminder of eternity, and of God's time scale.

We all have experiences like this, when the familiar addresses us in a new way. I remember as a young boy gazing at the stars in the night sky and feeling overawed, and not a little scared! Or sitting by the sea in Cornwall, absorbed in the waves breaking on the rocks and sending up huge plumes of spray. We are meant to have these experiences; they are part of the way we grow and become more human; they are moments of significant time. Modern life overshadows these moments. We live an instant society; significant time is lost in a series of equal moments; everything is urgent. The urgency and immediacy of modern life is deeply antagonistic to the Spirit. We are all caught up in the cycle of busyness, but it neglects the wholeness of the human

person. We are spiritual beings as well as material and intellectual beings, and our spiritual development has not kept pace with our material and intellectual development. We are unbalanced; we have lost contact with eternity, with the time-scale that God has placed in our hearts. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, our self-concern has turned us away from God.

Life is not just a succession of moments, it also consists of significant times, special moments which give it shape and meaning. The church's year is structured around the significant moments of Jesus' life: his birth, baptism, temptation, death, and resurrection. Our own lives are shaped by significant moments: birth, baptism, leaving home, marriage, career choices, retirement and bereavement... It is as we pay attention to these times we discover the eternity that God has placed in our hearts.

Lent celebrates the time Jesus went into the wilderness. The Judean wilderness is a stony desert; Jesus went among the stones to listen to God's calling, to prepare for his ministry, to get in touch with eternity. In Lent God calls us to do the same. He has set eternity in our hearts too; we need to get in touch with it if we are to be fully human. I am amazed how some people just bump along on the surface of life – a series of incidents of disconnected living. Such a life brings little of the deep sense of God, and provides few resources when we encounter significant moments like love, illness and death. We all have the capacity to go deeper; Lent is about taking time to do this. There is a

time for activity, but there is also a time for rest and re-creation, and God has made each beautiful in its time.

So in Lent we are called to disengage from the culture of busyness. The most pressing things are rarely the most important, and the most important things are rarely the most pressing. To attend to the most important requires deliberate effort. We miss the point of Lent if all we do is add things to our schedule, like extra services or another course or group meeting. Lent is really about making space. If we are going to give up something for Lent, let it be something that is time-consuming so that we create space for prayer and reflection – and wonder.

Needless to say, this is much easier said than done. It's hard to resist the spirit of the age, but you can do it for a few weeks, and you can do it for longer when you realise that creating space is more about the inner disposition of your spirit than re-organising your diary. The inner life has always been a bit of puzzle; someone once asked me: 'What is this inner life?' It's not about creating something new, but about getting in touch with what is already there, within us. Most of us know that satisfying our material needs is not enough. Even when we have enough and to spare, deep down we're not satisfied. The consumer society does not fulfil our deepest needs, and that's the root cause of many of our problems: drugs, drink, anti-social behaviour, even the loss of national identity. Our spirit, the part of us that makes us uniquely human, is not satisfied and longs for the living water – the gift that Jesus offered to the woman at the well. God has placed

eternity in our hearts; we just need to tune-in to his wavelength, attend more to our feelings, and let our deep experiences speak to us.

I think this is what happened to the woman at the well – more took place than St John relates (*John 4.1–30*). How often have you tried to describe a conversation, and realised that words alone are insufficient to describe what really went on. So with the woman: Jesus interpreted her life for her, as she said to her friends afterwards, ‘he told me everything I have ever done.’ Jesus spoke to her spirit, and refreshed her spirit.

Ely Cathedral used to be a Benedictine monastery, and the life of the monks was shaped by the Rule of St Benedict. St Benedict understood the way our inner lives shape our outer lives. His Rule required the monks to take a vow of stability. Outwardly this vow required them to commit themselves for life to a particular monastery, in the same way that two people commit themselves to each other in marriage; but inwardly it required them to free themselves from other attachments: to other people and to material possessions. This enabled the monks to see themselves as given wholly to God, and gave them time to glimpse eternity. How do we see ourselves? If it is chiefly in terms of career success, or being at the beck and call of our family, or the heart and soul of the sports club, and so on... then moments of significant time will pass us by: the glimpse of eternity that comes with the sunset, or looking into the eyes of those we love, or in marvelling at the stones in a garden centre, will be lost. In T. S. Eliot’s oft-quoted phrase, ‘we had the experience but missed the meaning.’ It

was to grasp the meaning of his life that Jesus went into the wilderness, among the stones, to catch the rhythm of eternity.

For us Lent is an opportunity to do the same, and to make stillness more a part of our lives every day, and there are many books and courses that show us how. We can still do well at work, look after our family, enjoy our sport... but we also look after our inner life and refresh our soul. As St Paul wrote to the Romans, it was not Abraham's outward achievements that commended him to God, but his willingness to follow where God called.

It is by changing things a little at a time that the big changes gradually come about. We find that we begin to see things differently, our capacity for wonder increases, prayer becomes more natural, the way we relate to people and the world changes, we become more whole, because gradually we get in touch with the eternity that God has placed in our hearts. And a visit to the garden centre becomes an encounter with God.

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