

Timing

Isaiah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 15:1-11

In my first parish, many years ago, I was going to conduct a funeral. I had met with the family and made all the arrangements. I'd spoken to the undertaker and had agreed that I would make my own way to the crematorium. The journey usually took about twenty minutes, but I had given myself plenty of extra time to get to the crematorium, park in the car park, and make sure everything was all right with the staff before the family and the hearse arrived.

As I drove up the avenue to the chapel, I could see the local undertaker standing beside the empty hearse, and then, to my horror, saw the family coming out of the chapel. There had been a very last minute change of timing for the funeral, and the family had told the undertaker they would let me know about the change, but had forgotten to do so. Everyone had realised what had happened, but in the days before mobile phones nobody had been able to contact me as I was already on my way down. The family were apologetic. The undertaker was apologetic, but I felt awful. Even talking about this now, and it's over quarter of a century ago, still gives me chills. I have a horror of being late for anything, and would rather be half an hour early, than five minutes late.

Timing is everything. Can you think of those times in your life when you were in the right place and at the right time? Those times when you were the person with the answer that was needed, or the skills that saved the day. When you encountered that person who changed the course of your life, romantically, professionally, educationally. When you picked up that book that opened your eyes and intellect; when you heard that piece of music that engaged your imagination; when you saw that view that gave you that sense of peace, or understanding, or delight. In those moments in time, when the timing of the universe came together and worked in you a transformation, God spoke and your world was never quite the same again.

George Macleod, the founder of the Iona Community, used to say that some people thought such moments were mere coincidence. He would go on to say that if you thought that, he

wished you a very dull life. God's timing is rarely explicable, but there will not be a person here in Church today for whom the providence of God's good timing has not made all the difference in the world.

Timing, of course, isn't always about things that working out well, being in the right place at the right time. There are enough instances in living when people are in the wrong place at the wrong time. It remains one of the challenges of faith to wrestle with that. We want to claim the good timing for God, and the bad timing – well – whose is that? The bad timing when genetics collide and a family heart weakness, or dementia probability, or some other frailty is passed on through bad timing from one generation to the next. When a wrong road is taken, and an accident happens. When leaving a fraction too early, or too late, leads to disaster. Is that God's planning and providence too? The answer is one we might not like, or find hard to accept. God's timing is not always ours.

“Time is the narrative of the human journey, a journey undertaken with hope because, although the way is long and hard, we are not alone.”ⁱ Timing is putting that narrative into practice and living it out. We are challenged, daily, to make the most of our time. What an indictment if we were to get to the end of our lives, whether they be long or short, and realise we had done little, or achieved little, or experienced little, or created little. I like the Martin Luther King saying that we, “...must use time creatively.”

Time is a gift. Timing is about working with that gift and letting it shape our lives, our dreams, our hopes, and building up our resilience and our experience. Timing is about learning to take in our stride the good and the bad, and working our way through them, faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly. Time builds up our ability to cope with life. I read of an older person who used to take long, long walks. He passed on his wisdom and shared the secret of his endurance: take five-minute breaks every hour. You need to stop once in a while, to breathe, relax, take in the view. Otherwise you wear yourself out. Perhaps that is true of life too.ⁱⁱ Timing is about knowing when to move forward, and knowing when to be still. Timing is about knowing when to act, and knowing when to wait.

There are certain events in life where time seems to stop still. There are moments that divide time: what was before is changed and is no more. An event like 9:11 was, for the world, one of those moments. History is marked by many of these events. So also are our personal lives. Some events joyful: a marriage proposal, a birth, success at an interview; some events more difficult: the ending of a relationship, a death, a redundancy.

Isaiah, in our reading, had one of those moments. It defined the rest of his life. It was almost as if he was born anew on that day in the temple when he saw God in such immensity that the hem of God's garment filled the entire temple. Then God reached out, and in an image Isaiah's lips were touched by a burning coal. It was a decisive moment. He could no longer talk about the weather or the latest gossip. Isaiah was transformed from something with little to say to someone with much to say because an understanding of what God was saying and doing in the world had become sharply real to him.

Isaiah was given not one but many visions of what the world was, and what it might become, if people were to be true to their faith in God.

But the timing had to be right. Who knew how long God had been calling Isaiah; perhaps he had not been ready or willing to listen to what God had to say. But on this occasion, when the timing was right, God spoke and acted, and Isaiah listened and responded.

The same was true for Paul. He had lived around the time of Jesus, but never met Him. He wasn't a disciple, and never heard Jesus preach, or saw Him die, or experienced the resurrection in the same way as the other disciples and followers of Jesus did. But something happened. Not only on the road to Damascus but every day after. The timing was right. Paul heard, saw, understood, realised. And though he had been 'untimely born', yet God through Jesus gave Paul a place, and a task. To tell the world about Jesus, and to make a difference in Jesus' Name. The story of the resurrection of Jesus, and the power of Jesus' presence at work in the world was shared. Paul's life was changed forever, because the timing was right, and Paul's life, and God's purpose, merged and moved onwards. Rarely smoothly, rarely easily, but they moved on, faithfully, hopefully, lovingly.

The Church is in a time of transition, nationally and locally. The General Assembly will be looking at a radical action plan that will affect the way things are done here in Scotland. Change is in the air, and the need to evolve and transform is with us again. We should not be unnerved, or surprised. The Reformation motto dear to the Church of Scotland is always reforming and requiring to be reformed. There will be challenge, but there is hope.

The same is true in the life of our congregation. Twenty years ago, who would have thought that where we are now and what we have done to date would have been possible? Look around us – look at what our listening to God’s timing has allowed us to do and achieve. There is more to come as we continue as a congregation to work out what, in the next few months, what God is calling us to do next. Will we listen? Is the timing right? Will we engage with God’s timing for us? Timing is everything, and to respond faithfully takes courage, and vision. The way may be long and hard; there are real challenges. But we are not alone. We are never alone. We must use time, and God’s timing, creatively.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, p178

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p41