"TIME"

Geoffrey R Usher

Well; we've made it. We have got past all the pre-Christmas rush and bustle:- the shopping; the writing and sending of cards; the opening and reading of cards received; the sorting out what to do with all the cards: stand them on mantelpieces and tables and other flat surfaces, and try to remember not to open or shut doors energetically enough to blow them over; or hang them from strings; or staple them to hanging ribbons; or ... ; the wrapping and labeling of presents while trying to remember whether you have over-looked someone important; the lunches and parties and carol services and mince pies and more parties and tables of food and more mince pies; and the special family rituals related to Christmas; and Christmas Day itself, with the exchanging of gifts, and too much food, and more mince pies, and the afternoon siesta, and television repeats, and clearing up afterwards, and lots of dishwashing, and perhaps another mince pie.

We've made it. The rush and bustle calmed down, and there was that quiet holiday lull between Christmas Day/Boxing Day and New Year's Eve, and perhaps an opportunity for more celebration, although perhaps less hectic.

Think about the conversations you have had over the last week' or two. Not the really serious "meaning of life" conversations, but the informal "passing the time of day" conversations with friends and acquaintances, people you have met in the street or at the shops or at social events. What sorts of things have you said, or heard?

My guess is that one of the most common conversational questions during the last couple of weeks would be along the lines of: "Hasn't the year gone quickly?"

Have you said it? Have other people said it to you? How many times? Too often to count?

Hasn't the year gone quickly? Or, as it was put in the National Express advertising material that dropped through my letter box at home in Sheffield over twenty years ago:

> Where has the year gone? It only seems five minutes since we were talking about ... last year ..., and it's here again!

Hasn't the year gone quickly? Perhaps an appropriate response is: Don't they all? Doesn't every year go quickly, especially as we come to the start of a new year and look back at the old one?

The quiet holiday lull between Christmas/Boxing Day and the New Year seems to provide an opportunity each year to look back - to look back at what we have done during the last twelve months: to look back at what we have done, what we have achieved, what we have intended but failed to do.

It is an opportunity to reflect on what has happened to us:- the joys, the good times, the happy times, the unexpected pleasures, the successes, and the celebrations; and also the sadnesses, the bad times, the bereavements, the illnesses, the failures and the frustrations.

For most people, the year will have been a varied patchwork, not a bland monochrome.

We can reflect not only on what has happened during the year now gone, but also on our responses - what we have done about what has happened. Have we allowed events to distort our focus? Have we allowed events to dominate our lives for longer than might be reasonable or appropriate?

Have we learned from what has happened to us?
Have we learned from events around us?
Have we learned from our experiences?
Have we made the most of them? Have we prayed / given thanks? Have we cursed?

How have we responded to events? What have we done about what has happened?

Whatever we have done; whatever has happened; however we have responded:- time has ticked away inexorably, irretrievably, often without our noticing it.

Heavens! Is that the time already?!

Sometimes, of course, we have been painfully, uncomfortably aware of the passing of time - for example, when we are sitting in a taxi, which is not moving because it is stuck in a traffic jam, and we are watching the meter tick away, tick away, tick away, and we can do nothing about it.

Tick, tick, tick. The frustration of the traffic jam and the delay is bad enough, but it is made worse by knowing that - tick, tick, tick - the delay is costing us money.

Did you know that there is a timepiece called Timisis? It is more - much more - than a mere wrist-watch. This unique chronometer keeps track of the average life span. Now, the average life span (the classic three score years and ten) runs to something like 2.4 billion seconds, give or take a few; we're talking averages and generalities. Whatever the exact number, it's a lot of seconds.

The Timisis, this unique chronometer, keeps track of them.

Once you have acquired your Timisis and fed it some basic information about yourself, such as age and gender, you can get from it, whenever you wish, an instant digital read-out of how much time you have left on this planet, based on age, gender, and standard actuarial tables.

Think about it. Press the button, and be told just how much longer you are likely to have.

According to the advertising: "By monitoring every precious minute, Timisis arouses you to the joy of living and helps you to-maximize the quality of each day."

Well, I don't think so! I think it is much more likely to arouse you to fits of distraction.

Watching the taxi meter tick, tick, ticking away certainly doesn't help me to enjoy the ride, and I can't imagine having the quality of each day improved by regular reminders on my wrist that I have only seconds to live - even if I can expect another half-billion or so before I die..

Tick, tick, tick. Your time is running out.

Hurry up and enjoy yourself, because you have only four hundred and sixty one million seconds to go, before your batteries run down.

I don't even particularly like waiting for the timer on my microwave oven to go PING? --- and that's a signal about something enjoyable: the meal that is ready, or the cup of coffee that has been re-heated.

I admit to having my suspicions about people who are particular enough about their preference for three--minute boiled eggs that they have an egg-timer in the kitchen. Me: I like eggs hard-boiled. No dipping toast soldiers into what I reckon is seriously under-cooked runny egg for me. I just let my eggs boil away until there is no chance of their being anything less than firm, all the way through.

Think about the times which have been most valuable, significant or enjoyable for you over the past year: the times which provided the stuff of warm memories to carry with you into this new year.

Were those times when you were busy counting the seconds; when you knew just how long something had been happening?

Were those times when perhaps you knew just how much longer it was going to last? Was the quality of the experience maximized by your accurate measurement of its time span, its duration?

Or: were the times which were most valuable, significant or enjoyable for you over the past year the times when you lost track of time, when you were not minding the clock or counting the seconds?

Were they the times when, for example, you were talking with friends, or reading to children, or watching a sunset, or walking the dog, or reading a favourite book, or listening to music, or making love, or enjoying a dinner party?

My old teachers college friend Ted Reilly and his wife Jura' have lived in Geelong for many years. They are both retired teachers, Ted after a career in high school and universities, teaching literature, with an emphasis on poetics (for which he wrote his PhD thesis). We correspond fairly frequently. About the middle of last year he sent me an article he had written and asked me for my comments on it. I got to work on it. Suddenly the phone rang.. It was my physiotherapist, checking up on me. I had become so absorbed in editing Ted's
piece that I lost track of the time, and forgot
about my physiotherapy appointment!

What really matters is not how accurately we keep time, how accurately we count off the passing seconds of our life, but how well - how felicitously - we spend it, how fully we live it.

As Paul Tillich said, in the piece which was our second reading:

> The only way in which to live - to live fully and with real awareness - is now - the present moment whenever that may be.

Service Seven in Upper Chapel's Unitarian Orders of Worship includes the Call to Worship with which I began this service. It ends:

> Our great end is to awaken the soul: to bring understanding, conscience and heart into earnest, vigorous action on religious and moral truth, to excite and cherish spiritual life.

It seems to me that conscience, heart, moral truth and spiritual life don't have anything to do with clock watching, and are not enhanced by counting seconds. '

Our first reading this morning was Frank Walker's "Meditation for the Turning of the Year". I want to finish now with some words from another prayer/ meditation by Frank, entitled "Time", (which happens to be the title of this sermon):

Some of us find that we haven't enough time. We do so much that often we say we haven't any time. Save us from being so busy that we have no time for rest, for quietness and unhurried enjoyments.

We give thanks-when we leave behind the business to enjoy times of peace and simplicity: for sitting in the sun, for an unhurried talk with a friend, for enjoyment of music and thought, for the quiet contemplation of something beautiful and good.

Save us, 0 God, from saying we have no time when someone in need comes to us, asking for our help and attention.

Some of us find we have too much time. Time hangs 'heavily on our hands. We can no longer do many of the things we once enjoyed.

Help us not to waste time in vain regret. Make us know that the stream of life makes all things new, and brings us fresh opportunities new interests, new attitudes, new people. Make us know that we always have time to appreciate beauty and relieve suffering.

May our lives be measured and valued not by the number of seconds tracked by a Timisis, but by how well we have used whatever time may be allotted to us. May we spend our time much more carefully than we count it.