

From “Chronos” to “Kairos” - Responding to God’s appointed time

Do you know what this is? My wife and I were confronted with such a beast as we rounded a street corner in Cambridge, England, some 18 months ago.



It’s called a “Chronophage” – from the Greek “*chronos*” (meaning “time”) and “*phage*” (meaning “eater”) and it portrays a mythical, insect-like creature which controls a magnificent golden clock.

The inventor, Dr John Taylor, says his creativity was triggered by the realisation that time is both eternal at a universal level, yet extremely limited at a personal level, and that the time we have spent cannot be regained – almost as if it has been eaten up by a relentless, menacing creature.

Do you resonate with such thinking? – especially as we move into another New Year!

Fierce and forbidding, the Chronophage is a creature that consumes time by walking steadily above a huge clock face, pulling the minutes along with a rocking motion, its jaws snapping shut every 60 seconds as it swallows up another minute. Yet occasionally, the creature seems to play a trick, speeding up or slowing down the passage of time. As the hour strikes the sound of an ominous clonk of a chain dropping into a coffin creaks out. The creature blinks twice in satisfaction.

"It is terrifying and it is meant to be," says John Taylor. The extraordinary new clock was unveiled by Stephen Hawking at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge back in 2008.

"Basically I view time as not on your side. It will eat up every minute of your life, and as soon as one has gone he's salivating for the next. It's not a bad thing to remind students of. I never felt like this until I woke up on my 70th birthday, and was stricken at the thought of how much I still wanted to do, and how little time remained."

Time is both eternal at a universal level - yet extremely limited a personal level. Another approach here is to consider the way the ancient Greeks understood time. This was in terms of “*chronos*” and “*kairos*”.

“*Chronos*” forms words like “*chronological*” and it refers to clock time – time that is sequential – time that can be measured – in seconds, minutes, hours and years.

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“Kairos” is different. It cannot be measured, it is not a quantitative concept. Rather “kairos” is qualitative. “Kairos” refers to the “right” moment, the “opportune” moment, the “perfect” moment - when we take a breath, when we pause, when significant opportunities arise and when remarkable things happen.

The Greeks liked to personify just about everything, and “chronos” was depicted as “Old Father Time” - a weary, bent-backed old man with a long grey beard, carrying a scythe and an hourglass. His resemblance to the Grim Reaper is not accidental. Indeed, in India the equivalent of “chronos” is “kala” from which the destructive goddess, “Kali” takes her name. “Kali” is often depicted in a very grizzly way as she dances across the bodies of corpses cloaked in a belt of skulls and severed hands.

Kairos, on the other hand, was for the ancient Greeks, a young man - graceful, agile and handsome. Statues of him could be found all across the Greek peninsula. In India the equivalent is “ritu” and this portrays a strong spiritual sense beyond the ordinary business activities of life. It refers to the “right” time when religious ceremonies and rituals are to take place.

In our Christian understanding, “kairos” has a sense of “the right time” and of “ripeness”. For example, the book of Ecclesiastes goes on to say:

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted...”

This is “kairos”. This is time not defined by chronology. This is time that cannot be measured. This is time that cannot be taken away from us, be swallowed up or be devoured by the circumstances of this mortal world!

In the New Testament context, “kairos” refers to a “decisive point” - to “the appointed time of God” – to God’s timing or to God’s order and scheme of things. These are times of significant opportunity and they are times when remarkable things can happen.

Indeed, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the church worship begins with a short statement to the effect that - in this act - we are moving beyond chronological time to an intersection with God’s time. In other words, in worship we are entering a time that cannot be measured, a time that cannot be consumed, a time that cannot be lost or stolen, a time that cannot be subverted or overturned by the circumstances of this world.

For here worship is a coming into the presence of the eternal God who cannot be contained, who cannot be defined or who cannot be limited by the “chronos” or its associated devouring creatures.

And, you see, this is what we actually do as we celebrate Holy Communion today. We do indeed remember that historical meal - that Friday evening supper located in chronological time when Jesus broke bread in the upper room in Jerusalem just before his arrest.

But in doing so we also enter into a different space, into a different dimension, as we celebrate the living presence of Christ who is with us now and who is beyond all time and all space.

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And, friends, in this act we also take our place at the table of God's heavenly banquet. This is a feast that is prepared for all people and which will take place at the culmination of all time.

In today's Bible readings we reflect on this dimension of "kairos". Firstly, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians a magnificent picture is drawn where we gain a glimpse of what is called the "cosmic Christ". This is a very different picture to the Jesus of the Gospels. And the point here is that the person, Jesus, who is born in a stable in Bethlehem, who is baptised in the River Jordan, who heals, preaches and teaches in the Galilean countryside, and who is arrested and executed as a common criminal in Jerusalem – is the one who stands at the heart of eternity.

This Jesus is the one in whom all our hopes are focused. This Jesus is the one who gathers all things to himself in a marvellous, generous act of mercy, grace and love.

Then in John's Gospel we encounter the incredible story of the "Word made flesh" – the "logos" where the Jesus of history, the Jesus of chronological time, is also the Christ of eternity – the one who exists for all time and who will always be there even when this momentary, mortal, chronological life comes to an end.

Indeed, the first chapter of John stands in stark contrast to the birth narratives that we read in Matthew and Luke at Christmas where the setting is the town of Bethlehem and the players include Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi from the east. For here in John's Gospel we encounter a "theological" somewhat "big picture" approach - as the full nature and the mind-boggling truth of the eternal Christ, the One who is with God, is revealed and explained.

And this "theological", "big picture" approach is all about a life that is geared to "God's own timing". This approach is all about a life that is focused on God's order and God's way of doing things and - not upon the historical whims of Roman governors or the political intrigue of King Herod that can be so easily lost or consumed in chronological time.

So, as we consider these things, ask yourself the question – during this New Year move beyond notions of mortal, chronological time to ask - what will be the "God" moments, the "kairos" moments in your life? What will be the "God" moments, the "kairos" moments in the life of this West Epping community? What will be the "God" moments, the "kairos" moments in this nation and across the entire world? In other words, what will be the truly "groundbreaking" moments that intersect with God and make a long-lasting, significant impact?

Here, I do not refer to routine operations or to day-to-day activities confined to the "chronos" dimensions of our lives. Rather, I refer to those spaces, I look to those opportunities where God intervenes, where God intersects with our life experiences - to shape us in really profound ways and to move us forward with real strength and vision.

So, on this first Sunday in 2014 let us focus beyond "chronos" to "kairos". Let us willingly and enthusiastically enter into that space where God sets the agenda and where we live in constant touch with the one who makes a real difference.

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For an openness to “kairos” is to look beyond oneself. An embrace of “kairos” is to connect with the big picture. An engagement with “kairos” is to consciously join in God’s creative, liberating work. It is to become integral, active agents in God’s work of renewal and transformation. For here we are challenged to openly engage with what God’s intends for the creation and to intentionally participate in what God is doing in the world.

The “kairos” moments and the “kairos” opportunities we face in 2014 may well touch on issues like what is God calling the church to be and what is God calling this church to do in the future? And with this in mind, it’s important to ask - are we a community of people who simply gather each Sunday with good memories to celebrate - or are we a community of people who are willing to listen to the stirring of the spirit, who are ready to explore new initiatives and who are prepared, where necessary, to embrace change and to be the church in new, creative and even uncomfortable ways?

I believe there are various other “kairos” moments and there are a number of other “kairos” opportunities coming before us in 2014. These involve issues including how we choose to support God’s priorities that focus on support for the most vulnerable people among us. And this includes care for the frail and the aged, support for the migrant and the asylum seeker, nurture for young families struggling against the massive pressures of modern life and encouragement for our teenagers who do not, at present, have real a place in our church.

Indeed, I believe these will be issues in this forthcoming year where we will engage with God and where we will be further formed and challenged as a community to embrace the vision and the passion that this West Epping community is known for!

Friends, the Chronophage may continue to stalk us. Indeed, that beastly insect, as it consumes valuable time, certainly gave me the shivers on a cool autumn day in Cambridge. But, you see, our focus is to be on higher, more important things!

In 2014 let us open ourselves to the God who is beyond anything we can surely nail down, predict or fully comprehend. In 2014 let us be present to this God who offers us many challenges. During this New Year let us focus on higher things as we wait upon and as we prepare for those poignant opportunities and those unique events that will come to us from God.

And let us be ready to act – let us be ready to respond – let us be ready to engage with this God - to further enhance God’s kingdom and to be one with God’s purposes here on earth and in heaven. Amen.



John Barr
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