The Time of Confusion

March 15, 2020

3rd Week of Lent

It was a strange day for the Samaritan woman. It was midday, a time without cool shadows, a time without other friendly voices. It was a repetitive time, a monotonous time, a burdensome time of heat and a heavy amphora. It was nonetheless a time that would forever change her experience of time. Though we speak of sacred time, though we have our books of hours and our religious seasons, we do not really give much real thought to time, nor relate it to our spirituality. For us, time is work and finance; time is commuting; time is a day timer or an agenda. The Scriptures, however, constantly remind us of time as something more. Time shapes the meaning of phenomena; it shapes our experience of life. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we read that there is a time for everything: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

William Paley, who is both loved and hated as a controversial apologist, once made the analogy of the world as a timepiece: “In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer I had before given, that for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. ... There must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed [the watch] for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use. ... Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation” (*Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, 1802). Similarly, Hagiwara Sakutaro, the Japanese poet, in searching for comparisons for the Buddha, reasoned that he was not like an old, rusted watch left in the sands of the shore where the grass has withered (Hagiwara Sakutaro, *Aoneko*. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1993. First published in 1923). Whether or not these analogies are valid, it is fascinating that Paley and Hagiwara chose watches, pieces of clockwork, as their analogues for spiritual realities. For if there is one thing that rules us, one thing that we do not understand, it is what time is, and *what time it is*.

Time is one of the things that God ordained: “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars” (Genesis 1:14-16). One of the charges that Jesus levelled against the scribes and rulers was that they did not understand the times: “‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’” (Matthew 16:2-4). In our reading today, the Samaritan woman also does not know how to read the signs at first. Like most of us, she lives in a time of confusion. A time of confusion can be a historical season, but it can also be a personal season. The poor Samaritan woman is out of synch with the natural course of time: “It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’” (John 4:6-10). In the midday sun, she is drawing water when others are at home. She does not want to run into anyone. Her daily schedule is ruled by her social anxiety and her own sense of shame. She is a pariah, chronologically and spatially—because her status dominates how she inhabits space and when she inhabits it. As they converse, it becomes clear that her life is full of confusion: “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’” (John 4:16-18). The reader does not know why she has had five husbands. One can come up with many unkind theories: she is a shrew, she is promiscuous, she is a lousy housewife, she is frigid—whatever the reason, nobody wants her for a wife for very long. She has had five seasons of marriage. Something must be wrong with her. That is possible. It is also possible that she married and lost one husband after another to sickness and death, to tragedy after tragedy. And now, she is cohabitating with a man to survive or deal with her loneliness, but is unable to face another season, another time, of marriage—with all of its fragile hopes that might be crushed like glass. The reason is not important. Anyone who has been in a long relationship or marriage knows that an indelible bond is formed. She now has six sets of memories to sort through; five different losses to mourn; five or six challenges to her self-esteem and sense of time. That is not the extent of her confusion, however. She has questions for the rabbi—theological questions. One thing that is absolutely clear about this encounter is that the woman is capable of being friendly and conversational; she is a deep thinker, someone with a deeply spiritual side to her personality. She is one of the most colourful and interesting characters in the New Testament, to be honest: “The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’” (John 4:19-26). Through the upheaveals of history, the Samaritans had lost part of their religious and cultural heritage (2 Kings 17). They only had the first five books of the Law—they did not have the *Nevi’im and Ketuvim—*the prophets and the writings. They only had a hazy, vague notion of a coming Messiah, the *Taheb,* or Restorer, the great prophet promised by Moses (F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994. 111). Theologically, the Samaritan woman does not quite understand the times or what is to happen. Like all of us, whether our wounds come from tragedy, sin, spiritual confusion or the detritus of history, she is lost in time.

Then a rabbi, who should be avoiding her and her well at all costs, who likewise seems lost in time and place and oblivious to the social norms that history demands, asks her for a drink. The confusing encounter with Jesus brings an end to her confusion and a solution to the problem of getting water. The woman wants to exit the daily repetition of her lonely and confusing experience of time, a blight in her life that is expressed through thirst: “Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’” (John 4:13-15). In confessing her thirst, the woman confesses her need for Christ. And Jesus assures her that time is about to be irrevocably changed. The time for arguing about sacred mountains is finished. The time for distrust and loneliness is finished. The time for spiritual thirst is finished. The time of waiting for the Saviour is finished. As Jesus says, “‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14); “the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

One of the most beautiful things in this story is how Jesus not only gives her words of life—he makes her a messenger of life. This would happen again in the resurrection with Mary Magdalene (John 20). Whereas the Samaritan woman had to hide from others to draw water, whereas she had to live in shame; now she is the honoured messenger of the Messiah; now she is the one who brings the words of salvation to her kin and fellow citizens. The Word has empowered her and changed her relationship to herself and to others forever: “Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him” (John 4:28-29); “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’” (John 4:39). When we share Christ, we are not merely sharing good news; we are sharing a disposition, an attitude, and a behaviour that confers dignity and honour, appreciation and love. We are sharing God and His eternity. Jesus saw the depths of this woman and how the gift of God would transform her, as it did. Once upon a time, she was the slave of time; now she is befriended by Eternity.

There is a time to shop, and a time to stop shopping. There is a time to gather and a time to stop gathering. There is a time to work, and there is a time to stay home. A watch is not a bad analogue for our universe. There is design. It is not always easy to read the numbers or analyze the machinery. History is difficult to understand; the present is almost impossible to understand; the future is absolutely unknown. Our life is always a time of confusion, but eternity is clarity. As Søren Kierkegaard says, “Only the Eternal is constructive. The wisdom of the years is confusing. Only the wisdom of Eternity is edifying” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing.* New York: HarperOne, 1956. 36). What is known is that every day is a day for salvation, a day for quenching your spiritual thirst, a day to find hope, faith and love in Jesus Christ. Every day is a day for prayer, and every day is a day to know that all of our time exists within the eternity of the Godhead. The apostle Paul says, “For God says, ‘At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.’ Indeed, the ‘right time’ is now. Today is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2); “Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5:14). One need not wait for Lent to repent and find times of refreshing. One need not live in the time of confusion forever. The woman at the well was no longer lost in time, no longer lost in thirst. At midday, she found salvation in the eternal Saviour, and she became his beloved messenger of hope and love.

Benediction

Now is the time of dark invitation

Beyond a frontier you did not expect;

Abruptly, your old life seems distant.

You barely noticed how each day opened

A path through fields never questioned,

Yet expected, deep down, to hold treasure.

Now your time on earth becomes full of threat;

Before your eyes your future shrinks.

You lived absorbed in the day-to-day,

So continuous with everything around you,

That you could forget you were separate;

Now this dark companion has come between you.

Distances have opened your eyes.

You feel that against your will

A stranger has married your heart.

Nothing before has made you

Feel so isolated and lost.

When the reverberations of shock subside in you,

May grace come to restore you to balance.

May it shape a new space in your heart

To embrace this illness as a teacher

Who has come to open your life to new worlds.

--John O’Donohue

May the Lord give you a cheerful heart, which is good medicine,

And hearts full of prayers of faith which make the sick well;

May the Lord raise you up.

Do not fear; do not be dismayed;

God will strengthen you and help you

God will uphold you with His righteous hand.

May you enjoy good health; may all go well with you

Even as your souls are getting along well,

Be blessed today, tomorrow and for all time,

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

Amen.