

The Stewardship of Time

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 90:1-4,12; James 4:13-15; Mark 1:32-39

God has entrusted an extraordinary amount to our care: the world we inhabit, the gifts we possess, our material resources, our time, and life itself. Stewardship begins with the recognition that everything we are and everything we have comes from God and ultimately belongs to God. It's not simply a church programme or a matter of fundraising, but a way of life in response to God's generosity. Over the next few weeks we will reflect on three gifts entrusted to us: time, talents, and treasures. Today we begin with time.

Seven days in every week, twenty-four hours in every day, sixty minutes in every hour. Life is marked by many inequalities, but each of us receives the same number of hours each day. Yet how often do we find ourselves saying, "There simply isn't enough time. I'm rushed off my feet"? Time, once received as a gift, becomes something scarce and demanding. We hurry, feel harassed, and end up exhausted. Perhaps the real problem is not the amount of time we have, but how we understand the time we've been given.

Scripture invites us to see time as God's gift. In the first creation story a refrain sounds: "And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day ... the second day ..." on and on, six times. In the Hebrew understanding, the day doesn't begin at sunrise but at sunset, when our work is ending. So when we wake, we step into a day already under way. While we slept, God's world carried on its work, and our own bodies and minds were restored.

We awaken to a world we didn't make, but have received from God, and the question isn't so much, "What must I get done today?" but, "What is God asking of me today?" Time becomes a gift to receive rather than a possession to control.

What we achieve depends, finally, upon God's goodness. This is James' point: we don't know what tomorrow will bring, so we learn to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." Such trust permits us to rest. It frees us from frantic living and teaches us that, for what God calls us to do, there will be enough time. Each day can be received as a gift.

The creation story reaches its fulfilment not in one more burst of activity, but in rest: "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested." God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Sabbath is the crowning day of creation. The word Sabbath means to stop, to cease, to take a breath. Sabbath invites us to rediscover time as God's gift and to refuse the temptation to make productivity or busyness into a god. In a culture that often measures our worth by what we achieve, Sabbath reminds us that we are loved by God before we accomplish anything at all.

In Jonathan Swift's classic novel, *Gulliver's Travels*, the Lilliputians examine Gulliver's pocket watch and conclude that it must be his god, since he seldom does anything without consulting it. We may well recognise the temptation. In a performance-driven world, time spent in worship, prayer, conversation, or delight can seem unproductive. We become preoccupied with getting things done and lose the capacity to enjoy God, one another, and life itself.

Against this anxious spirit comes the command: "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy ... six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work."

One day in seven is set apart for rest and renewal, a time to stop, to pray, to play, and to remember that the world does not depend upon our ceaseless effort.

The Sabbath principle is captured in this story. A person is working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" someone asks. "Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree." "You look exhausted. How long have you been at it?" "More than five hours, and it's hard work." "Why not stop for a moment and sharpen the saw? The work would go faster." "I don't have time," comes the reply. "I'm too busy sawing!"

Rest is not a reward for finishing everything. Since everything is never finished, rest is an act of trust.

There will always be more to do than we can accomplish. We must therefore distinguish between what we feel we *need* to do and what we are *called* to do. Consider Jesus. The needs around him were overwhelming, yet he never appears frantic. He welcomed people and received interruptions as occasions of grace. Yet he didn't meet every need, because every need was not his call.

His time was guided by the Father. That is why the Gospels so often show him withdrawing to pray, frequently at the beginning of the day. However talented, energetic, or compassionate we may be, we cannot accomplish everything that needs doing. But we can make room for what God is calling us to do and become. We discover that call by placing our relationship with God first.

Anyone who has tended a garden knows that growth cannot be hurried. The gardener prepares the soil, plants the seed, and waters faithfully, but cannot make the seed grow. At some point, the gardener must stop and trust the unseen work taking place beneath the surface.

Our lives are much the same. We are called to be faithful with the time God gives us and then to trust God with what follows.

When the Easter Candle is first lit, we pray:

Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end,
Alpha and Omega, all time belongs to him, and all ages;
to him be glory and power,
through every age and for ever. Amen.

The risen Christ is Lord of our time. Our days are held in his hands. Let us receive each day with gratitude. Let us honour it with faithfulness. Let us entrust the results to God. We don't need to do everything. We need only be faithful with the time entrusted to us. And for that calling, by God's grace, there is enough.

Gracious God,
teach us to receive each day as your gift,
to be faithful in what you give us to do,
and to trust you with what we cannot do.
Keep us attentive to your voice
and unhurried in love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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