

On Time

Back when I was in college, a group conveniently named “Chicago” came out with an interesting song which starts out with the words “Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?” This song comes to me as we again face the trauma of the time change. Get ready to reset your clocks!

But which way do I move the clock? Once again, we resort to the old saying “Spring ahead, fall back”. The fact that we are in October means that we are in the “fall back” time frame – that means, by setting our clocks back, we go from daylight saving time to standard time. The good thing about this is that we get a much-needed extra hour of sleep on a Sunday morning. (Being a priest, I especially appreciate this!) The bad thing is that, since the sun will be setting an hour earlier, it will already be dark when many of us will return home every afternoon.

Most of us are so accustomed to this twice-yearly predicament that we need a reminder: not everyone in the world goes along with the time change. Not even everyone in our own country does: our parishioners in Arizona and Hawaii stay on the same time all year round! Then there are the poor people of Indiana, many of whom have just changed from one system to another: when I was there recently, I saw them scratching their heads and heard them muttering that the government is going too far, even wanting to control the clock! But then, any standardization of time is due to such governmental meddling; without it, chaos would reign, and not just twice a year.

The fact that we can agree what time it is allows us to arrange our lives, our activities, and our meetings – or does it? It is an understatement to say that different people regard time very differently. My view of time was forged by my father, who used to take me to church every Sunday morning: if we arrived at church for the 9 o’clock Divine Liturgy later than 8:30, my father considered us late – even if we had to wait outside in the rain until the people who were there for “the 8” emptied out. Consider what happened when I, with my insistence on punctuality, encountered one of my fellow teachers, who happened to be from Argentina: for her, a scheduled 8 o’clock meeting meant that she could arrive at 9 o’clock and still be on time. Obviously, our visions of time “diverged”. Needless to say, sparks flew!

For all its arbitrariness, time is the “stuff” of our earthly lives; as my former boss used to say when asked if she had a moment, “I’ve got nothing but time; I’ve got time I haven’t even used yet!” In many ways, time is what we get in life, and the meaning we find in life depends on what we do with the time which is allotted to us. This idea is best expressed in that familiar passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens.

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather them; a time to embrace, and a time to be far from embraces.

A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to be silent, and a time to speak.

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

-Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 (NAB)

All this talk of time, these myriad activities, are enough to make one’s head spin. Even Ecclesiastes himself seems bewildered: “What advantage has the worker from his toil?” (v. 9).

When his head stops spinning, Ecclesiastes is finally able to make sense of the temporal merry-go-round: “I have considered the task which God has appointed for men [and women!] to be busied about. He has made everything appropriate to its time...” (vv. 10-11a). At first, he thinks that he has a handle on things, but he soon realizes that there is much that he does not and cannot grasp: “[God] has put the timeless into their hearts without men’s [or women’s!] ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work which God has done” (v. 11b-c). Ecclesiastes is at peace with his lack of control; he seems in agreement with the French Christian philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who said “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” They are both willing to live the mystery.

And what is the mystery? Remember what Ecclesiastes has said: God “has put the timeless into our hearts” (v. 11b). Boundless eternity has broken into our time-bound lives, allowing us to see beyond the futility of the daily humdrum. Only the eternal God is timeless; it is this same God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in our hearts, providing us direction, offering us consolation. Thank God for that Divine Spirit, Who comes – you guessed it! –“just in time”!

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op