

Advent 1: Understanding the Present Time

Series: Advent 2021

Texts: Isaiah 1; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 21.1-13

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Location: St George's Battery Point

Rom. 13:11 And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Have you ever asked the question what time is it?

It's a question that we hear pretty much every day in the Shaw household. Children are creatures of routine and for reasons of my and particularly Claire's own sanity we have designated TV time every second day. The kids look forward to this time as it starts approaching, they start asking "What time is it?" Unless they remember that they have watches and know how to tell the time.

What time is it?

The answer to that question shapes how we experience life. It shapes how we navigate the world. It frames our lives. To ask what time it is, is a question of how are we to understand the times in which we live. And as we look out, our times seem to be one of uncertainty and change. We're grappling with a pandemic, anxious about reopening of borders, with news of a new strain just emerging. We wonder whether globally we will be able to effectively address climate change. The political certainties of the West have been thrown up into the air. Western culture seems to be rapidly changing. We seem more fractured and polarised. How are we to understand the present time?

What time is it?

This too is a question of how we understand history. Where is history going? Does it indeed move forward? We're told again and again to believe in the idea of progress, and of the importance of being on the right side of history. But how do we know where history is going? Who is to say that our judgments of today won't be seen as folly in the future? And there are other takes on history. That history is instead cyclical, going around and around the merry-go-round. That what has been will be again. Or again that it is just one thing after another with no inherent meaning or purpose.

To ask, what time is it, is to ask, where do we fit in the grand sweep of time? What is the meaning of our lives?

Turning to the question of how we understand history we are confronted with the figure of Jesus Christ. This is the AD 2021, *anno domini*, in the year of our Lord.

Even with the change of AD to Common Era and Before Christ to Before the Common Era, Christ is still present by his absence. According to the calendar at least, Christ is the hinge upon which history turns.

In our NT reading, Romans 13.11 we read,

And do this, understanding the present time.

How are we to *understand the present time*?

The apostle Paul gives us a picture of what the present time is.

The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

The present time is the last hour of the night, the hour before the dawn.

And so we are to wake up, to be ready to greet the coming day.

What is the night and what is the day?

Paul tells us what the day is - the day of our salvation. The day that is when Christ will return.

As the creed says - he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. He is the sun of righteousness, risen with healing in his wings.

But that day has not yet come. It may be near, but the night is not yet past. We still live in the land of the shadow of death.

How are we to understand the present time? It is the time between the first and the second coming of Christ. We live in between the times, in the half light as the night passes away before the dawn comes. This is the frame of history - the first and second coming of Christ.

Understanding that this is the time in which we live, between the first and second coming of Christ ought to shape our lives, our hopes, our expectations and how we meet the world we face.

Today is the start of Advent. As we start looking to Christmas, and remembering Christ's first coming, so we also are called to wake up, to open our eyes, to see the night around us, the darkness of this present age with all its great evils.

To take just one example, a friend of mine works for International Justice Mission. This is the world's largest anti-slavery organisation. There are currently over 40 million people in slavery worldwide, more than any time in history. Human trafficking generates US\$150 billion annually, and 1 in 4 victims of slavery is a child. I love the work that IJM does. They work with governments, communities and agencies to strengthen systems of justice. They work to rescue and restore victims and to bring criminals to justice. Their aim is to eliminate slavery.

But even if we were to wipe out this evil from our society, there are many other evils to be addressed. And so we long for Christ to complete his work. The cry of the victim is a cry for justice, that will only be truly, impartially and fully done when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. Yes we long for him to judge because judgment is an act of telling the truth, showing things as they really are. He will expose the evils of the world as false and untrue and so banish them and release Creation to enjoy all that is right and good and beautiful. In fact for us as Christians we can work for justice because we know Christ will one day bring perfect justice, even though we know that until then our efforts will only ever be imperfect. And that is the case

whatever the call God has placed on our hearts - for climate justice, justice for women, justice for our First nations, justice for the poor.

Do this, understanding the present time, Paul writes.

Understanding the present time, that we live in the hour before the dawn, what are we to *do*?

How are we to act?

Verse 12 - *So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*

There is a way of life that corresponds to the darkness of this present night, a way of life that rejects the light, that hides from the day. Paul here highlights a lifestyle of excess - parties, drink and sexual license - not because he's a killjoy. Parties and drink were things Jesus himself enjoyed, and sex is God's creation. But out of their proper place, when these things loom large, when our lives centre on them, the coming dawn fades from sight and we're drawn back into the night. So too quarrelling and jealousy.

The contrast is to live as if it were day. To live in the light, in such a way that we would not be ashamed if what we do and say were put under the spotlight, as indeed they will be when Christ returns. Paul uses a different picture in verse 14

Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Paul tells us these deeds of darkness are the symptoms of a deeper problem - the desires of the flesh. The Greek word is *epithumia*, and once you start looking it's all over the New Testament. It basically means *over-desire*. St Augustine called it *disordered loves*. That is, our desires, our loves, are all mixed up. We love some things too much, others things too little, still other things in the wrong way, and most of all we don't love God first and more than everything else. But notice Paul's brief instruction conveys a powerful spiritual tool for resisting temptation. The second half of the verse literally reads, *and make no provision or planning for the desires of the flesh*. The point is that if you're working at putting on Christ, you won't be working on sin. If you're cultivating your love for God, your other desires will start to find their right place. It's not so much focussing on stopping doing the bad, as focussing on doing the good.

Understanding the present times, what are we to do? To live in the light, to put on Christ.

Looking back to verses 8-10 we see that living in the light and putting on Christ means simply love. Love is the sum and shape of what we are to do as we live between the first and second coming of Christ. Elsewhere Paul deals with the vertical dimension of love - our response to God. Here he focuses on the horizontal - our movement towards our neighbours. Love is the sum of the law. It is in response to God's love for us. It is in imitation of his love for us. Love gives as we have received. Love sees and recognises and affirms and gives space for the other as a fellow creature of God. Love commits us to the welfare and good of the other, whatever the cost. Love is at once very simple and clear and at the same time something profound and deep and that we find there is always more to discover, that we never come to the end of. And that is because love comes from God, it comes from the day and so will not end. Love is what we are given to do, understanding the present time.

To understand the present time is to be woken up to the reality of the passing night and reality the coming day. I'm reminded of the words of St George's 2nd rector, Henry Phipps Fry on his farewell to St George's in 1858:

May every one who is still unawakened be led to seek the Lord Jesus as men who have sins to be forgiven, a Saviour to serve and Heaven to gain. They who would be made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light must not hope to attain the Crown of Glory by a life of worldly pleasure and gain seeking. The day is far spent. The Lord is at hand. Oh, may He touch every heart that is still unawakened among you with an anxious concern for your precious souls; may you feel the burden and danger of sin, the terrors of God's judgment, and find no rest until you obtain the truth peace which Christ gives to the hearts in which he reigns by love, and which he renews and sanctifies by His Spirit.¹

It's my prayer that this Advent we will understand the present time. That as we look to Christmas and Christ's first coming, we would long even more for his coming again. But understanding the present time, it's also my prayer that Advent may be for you a time of reflection where you do some spiritual work. Examine those corners of your life that might be facing the night and turn them towards the day. And so in God's grace you might come to live more that life of love he calls us to and so reflect the glow of the coming dawn.

Collect for Advent

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

¹ Henry Phipps Fry, 'Farewell Address', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 9.2.1858