

Colossians 1:11-20

Psalm 46

Luke 23:33-43

On Patience. or Just. In time.

In a sentence:

Patience is finding life in the midst of life

Conventional wisdom has it that “patience is a virtue”. As often as not, this is declared by the person on whom we are waiting, and so the saying generally serves as a way of trying to keep us at a distance until our time, or turn, comes.

In our reading from Colossians this morning, Paul prays for two things for the Colossian believers: that they might be made strong with the strength that comes from God’s own power, and that they might be “prepared to endure everything in patience”. These are really not two things but one, and we’ll look at them together by focussing on patience.

Patience is a certain kind of waiting, the bearing of suffering or some other deprivation or difficulty. We don’t *have* to be patient. *Despair* is a way of enduring which knows no hope – no end to whatever afflicts us. Despair anticipates no resolution and the ethic of despair is sheer endurance. But few people can live this way; we’re more likely to opt for the less debilitating *resignation*, which is marginally happier. Resignation tolerates suffering and deprivation as a strategy of least resistance. At best, it will be a brave acceptance of what cannot be changed, a stoic keeping-at-a-distance of loss or suffering. A third response to suffering or deprivation is *impatience* – a refusal to accept suffering by exercising power to bring about a change. Impatience powers-through, if it has the resources, either in a DIY way or by haranguing others.

Why, of the various responses to difficulty, does Paul propose patience?

The key here is in recognising that patience is not simply endurance, and so not really like despair or resignation at all. Patience is a reconciliation with the timeliness (the temporality) of our lives. This is more than accepting that we need to wait out whatever is wrong. The timeliness of our lives is not in counting the ticking of clocks but rather in the fact that our lives are not “immediate”.

In our common talk, when something is immediate, it happens *now*: I want it done, and done *immediately*! The modern world is increasingly immediate in the sense that things happen faster: faster calculations, faster travel, faster service delivery, and so on. There is the more trivial sense of immediacy – quickness, without intervening *time*.

Broken down to its roots, however, the word “immediate” means, “without mediation”. Something is immediate in this sense when neither time *nor anything else* stands between us and what we desire. The “middle” drops out. We no longer order a book from a local store, which store then orders it from overseas; we can go direct to the supplier ourselves. We can – if we’re lucky! – find a life companion directly online without the hard work of lurking in this or that place, joining a social group, discovering who might be nearby and interested and available. We can find a spare part or the next piece in our collection without driving across the city or the country looking for it. Impatiently desiring Faster and Easier is not only about the immediate as instantaneous. It is also about the immediate as “without a middle”, without someone or something between us and our goal, perhaps even *standing in the way*.

By contrast, patience has discovered something which matters in the “not-immediate” (to put it clumsily) or, more positively, in what *is* mediated. After Paul speaks of patience in our passage this morning, he moves straight on to an account of God’s work in Christ: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Most importantly, this healing work does not take place “immediately” – instantly or without something between the origin and the goal. This is a mediating kingdom, a mediated relationship to God, and to everything. Christ stands in the middle between God and us. There is no immediate, direct link between us and God; time, space, and spaced-timed bodies are part of what it means to connect to this God.

Impatience is about *immediacy*; patience has come to terms with the mediated nature of our existence as creatures of this particular God. There is an unavoidable middle between us and what we truly need. But being unavoidable, it is *necessary*. And so patience experiences time and all that is in it *as itself* the stuff of life. “What we truly need”, then, is not just where patience might lead us but also the messy middle between here and there. Time and the persons and things which seem to be in the way between us and our desires are just what God uses to make us, to redefine and fulfil those desires. What God finally makes is the Body of Christ – a community of people learning to be patient with each other.

Patience is a virtue *not* because it is convenient for the person we are waiting on but because we too easily experience time as quite other than filled with divine possibilities between us and where we think we are going. In fact, having to wait seems increasingly to be creating a hatred of time and those who fill it, whether it be sitting in traffic, waiting 10 extra seconds for a slow internet download, standing in a supermarket queue or “having” to pause to eat in the midst of a busy day. We struggle with the passage of time and what fills it because it seems to be *empty* time: wasted time simply to be endured, time for resenting others because they are holding us up and, of course, time for being resented by them in return. Patience is not *waiting*; it is allowing that *God takes time*. God takes time, and makes of it life for the time-d.

Patience is not a dry agonising endurance of time or of each other. True patience reflects God’s patience with the world – God’s making use of our time. Patience does not simply endure but takes what fills our time to be a rich field sown with the stuff of life.

Patience is then not an emergency plan for a situation in which something has gone away. It is about the simple, God-blessed fact that we *are* situated – “sited” – in time, in relation to others.

Patience is being reconciled to being the kind of embodied, time-set creatures we actually are. We are not to be patient because the circumstances might require it; patience is all there is. To be reconciled to God and to each other is to be patient.

Paul prays for patience so that we might discover that even time which looks empty is God’s own time. *God* has been patient, has “endured” time, has become broken flesh in Christ, and so made time God’s own, the place God is content to be. If God is content to be here, to be patient is to claim this time as be truly *our* own, the place where we are content to be.

To be patient is, then, to be conformed to God’s own way of being and doing. To be patient is to be our true selves: the “image” of God.

By the grace of God, then, may the virtue of patience, with the strength it gives to redeem our time, be ever more fully ours, to our fuller humanity and (what is the same thing) to God’s greater glory. Amen.
