

Romans 6:12-14, 20-24

Psalm 89

Matthew 10:40-42

On Making Time

In a sentence:

God renews our times with the gift of a new tomorrow

Time and character

In his book *Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell unpacks the conditions which cause epidemics of the social and economic kind – epidemics of behaviour. What causes a long-available brand of shoes suddenly to sell wildly all over the place, or an online video to go viral?

Among the many factors Gladwell considers is the impact of *context* on behaviour. Our assessment of our own character – and so of our behaviour in different circumstances – will usually be a judgement we make independently of those different contexts. Gladwell shows how insecure that assessment might be, precisely because it does not attend to the impact of context.

Among several examples, Gladwell cites a study based on what we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This was a study of the difference context made to the actions of a group of seminarians (students for Christian ministry). The students were sent across campus to what they were told was an important appointment. Planted along their path was a person in some serious need. The study asked was whether priming these seminarians in particular ways would change their response to the needy person. If the importance of the appointment were exaggerated, and the students were told they were running late, would this affect how many would play the Samaritan and stop to help the needy person? The answer was, Yes. Significantly fewer students helped the needy person when their context – in this case, whether or not they were running late – put more “pressure” on them. Change the context, and you change the behaviour, the *expressed* character of the person.

Drawing on wider research, Gladwell concludes that context shapes our expressed character (our actions) much more than we realise. This is not a fatalistic conclusion – that we are *trapped* in this way – but simply a realistic observation: the temptation not to do the “right” thing is strongly influenced by where we find ourselves at the time. In certain contexts, we are tempted to argue that the ‘time’ is not right for this or that good thing we know could otherwise have been done.

If we are what we do then (which is difficult to deny), it also seems true that the times in which we live make us what we are: we are our context.

This must be true in a general sense: to be born in a particular place and a particular time makes us different from those of other places and times. But the issue here is not this general truism. The question is whether we are also – or could be – *more* than the time we live in.

The sense of time I’m using here is obviously not merely the ticking of a clock. It is the social and political times in which we live. And my interest is not merely that we are *in* this kind of time, but *how* we are here: does our time make us, or do we make time? Gladwell’s boot is oriented towards how circumstances change us and can be

manipulated to change us. How can we sell more phones or get more people to volunteer their time for some worthy cause? This is the times making us.

The possibility the gospel poses is the opposite: we are called to make time. This is not a matter of “finding” time in the crush of things we usually have to do. The time-making of the gospel is the re-making of the times in which we live, and so the remaking of ourselves. It is a new perception of life.

Paul: Christ as the time of our lives

This is the possibility Paul addresses our few verses from Romans today, even if he doesn't do it in these terms. Extending what he had to say in the previous chapter (Romans 5), Paul contrasts slavery and freedom, wages and gift, death and life, and so on. This language gives his treatment of the question an almost irremediably “religious” feel, and so makes it quite alien from the lives we think we normally live. Who thinks these things at breakfast, at the hairdressers or when binge-watching a new TV series?

But Paul is not “religious”. His concern is “the human”. Is the human bound or free? What are her necessities, and her freedoms? Where is she overwhelmed by death, and where by life? Or, in the terms we have just been considering, what kind of time does she inhabit? In contrast to the time of sin and death represented by Adam, Paul simply posits a time of God and life represented by Christ. If there is any sense in which we are “in Christ” as believers, it is then not a merely mystical thing. We are “in Christ” in the real lives we live. Paul says, “Let your experience of the time given you be different. Let *Christ* – and not Adam – be the time of your life”.

What does this mean?

Making time

To be in Christ *doesn't* mean, “Be religious”. It means to be in the times everyone else is in, but to do so in the likeness of the humanity of Jesus. This likeness *contradicts* the times. It is a strange new order in the midst of disorder. It sees the world everyone sees, but now seen in a different light. Jesus and his opponents did not differ about the world in which they lived, but only in *how* to live in it: do we *receive* our times, or do we make time? Do our context, our history, and our relationships make us, or are we making something of them?

There is a sense in which the time *in* which we live is always Yesterday; we always live *in received* time. *How we live in that time* is the possibility of a re-made Tomorrow which is not simply Yesterday done over again but is something new. This is what it means to “make time”. Jesus was lively, new-creation time in the midst of stale, old time. So confronting was this contrast that he was crucified for it. To speak of Jesus as risen is to speak of the possibility of such new time now, even among us.

As a congregation, of course, we are shifting to a new space. In the sense of “era”, this represents a new time. But it will be easy to mistake the mere shift as a newness which matters. It matters much less than whether the *quality* of our time changes. In Paul's terms, Adam's time – the time of Yesterday – is an ever-present possibility, wherever we are. But *Christ's* time opens up new tomorrows. Those new tomorrows are the time-making to which the gospel calls us. To make time is to reconstruct our time, to reconceive it. It is to bring order out of deep chaos, and so the gift of God is to become God-like, Creator-like. It is not our context which makes us; we are made to become makers.

And what does this feel like? To borrow from the Gospel reading today, it feels not like peace but like a sword. It might be hard – for us and for others. Making time does not avert difficulty or death. Again, Jesus died because of this. To make time is to change our future. This is not that we won't die, but that our death itself will be changed.

We move to the next thing, not in timid acquiescence to the times but in the effort to become new, to make the times new, and in calling others to join us in this.

This is the life of the gospel, as individuals and as a community. Let us then, grasp the gift of the gospel, and make time, anew.
