

Epiphany 3, January 24, 2021 I Cor. 7:29-31

It was just a few days before Christmas, around nine o'clock in the evening.

The parents of a little girl who was sick in hospital
left the room where their 7 year-old was sleeping
and went home exhausted.

About two hours later, the grandparents
who had been there most of the day went home as well.

Around 4 a.m. and 40 kms away,

the pastor's wife woke up abruptly out of a dead sleep,
convinced of the need for her to go and be with the little girl.
Rising quickly, she dressed quietly,
whispered to her drowsy husband where she was going
and left hastily for the hospital.

Arriving about 5 a.m., she went immediately into the room

where the little girl was sleeping, and 15 minutes later,
7 year-old Kira died. . .not alone but with someone who knew her,
loved her and cared for her holding her hand.

“What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the appointed time has grown short. . .
for the present form of this world is passing away.”

I suppose I could have used the death of someone known to us
either personally or congregationally to illustrate Paul's words. . .

but I didn't—and I didn't, in part, because those of us
who are in our 60's or 70's think we will live to be 80. . .
and those who are in their 80's think it is possible
that they will see the other side of 90. . .

when, in reality, St. Paul is (and pardon the pun) Paul is “dead on”
when he says, and I paraphrase here, “there's not much time left.”

For you see, I'm sure that nobody listening this morning

would consider seven years old to be a very long time to live. . .
although, for Kira, seven years was almost too much time—
because, for nearly every one of those years,
she had to fight just to stay alive.

Riddled with cancer of the blood,

assaulted by years of chemotherapy that had stunted her growth,
only recently having become virtually blind
due to the cancer spreading to her optic nerve—
frail, tiny, visually impaired, Kira lived from day to day
and treatment to treatment.

And I'm certain that many times when those big needles pierced her little body,
 when those powerful drugs coursed through her tiny veins,
 when nausea and sickness racked her fragile shell,
 I'm sure that many times Kira must have thought
 that seven years was a very long time.

But it wasn't. . .and it isn't.

“The appointed time has grown short.” Or to put it plainly: “There's not much time left.”

How many of us, I wonder, take those words of Paul at all seriously?
 Not more than a handful, I suspect, because all of us,
 even in the certain knowledge that one day we will surely die—
 nevertheless, all of us continue to believe
 that there will be time enough to change our lives
 and the way we live them later. . .later on. . .
 and that this world, even now in the midst of a global virus
 taking the lives of millions. . .that this old world of ours
 will last much longer and so will we.

And, to be honest, the law of averages gives pretty good odds
 that the sun will rise tomorrow and that life will go on tomorrow.
 But, to be equally honest, those same odds drop dramatically
 in that, while the sun will rise tomorrow, we may not.

“Really! There's isn't much time left.

Time, which seems to stretch out in front of us into forever
 when you are seven practically whips by at 70.
 And life, which at seven, gives the appearance of going on endlessly
 starts running down pretty fast at 70 or 80 or older.

The chance to live and love, laugh and cry, to explore and engage and retreat--
 the chance to waste time and fritter life away at seven—
 those chances seem far fewer and that waste more irresponsible
 the older we get, because, as time goes on, we come to know—
 REALLY KNOW. . .that we “ain't gonna leave this life alive.”

So, don't bet on tomorrow being the day when you can and will
 allow Christ to begin calling more of the shots in your life.
 I mean, we know he will be here tomorrow,
 but what we don't know is if we will be. . .
 because “the appointed time has grown short. . .
 and there isn't much time left.”

And I don't just mean “time” in terms of days or months or years.

I also mean “time” in the sense of “opportunity.” Let me explain.

I'm certain we would all agree that living is more than simply surviving,
 and that we can and do go through a lot of life without ever really "living" it—
 that is, without being aware of this wondrous and tenuous gift
 we have of being alive.
 And so we gobble up a lot of time rarely ever intent or focused
 on doing something majorly worthwhile with it.

For example, I remember when our sons were very young
 and Trud and I would sent them off to stay
 with my parents in White Rock for the weekend,
 leaving us two full days all to ourselves. . .ah, paradise.
 And yet, I have to admit that, as with most parents,
 we spent some of that time feeling rather lost. . .even lonely.

We would wonder what did we do with all our time before we had kids?
 For that matter, what did I do with all my time before I got married?
 What did you do with all your time before you joined the book club
 or the hiking club or the motorcycle club. . .
 or got hooked on the afternoon soaps or renovation shows. . .
 or agreed to help out. . . or hang out. . .at the Seniors' Centre?

What did we do with all that time that has passed us by?
 And what will we do with whatever time we have left?

It sometimes amuses me when I hear Christian people tell me
 how much they long for eternal life when I know they have no idea
 of how to spend five hours without getting bored
 on a rainy Sunday afternoon in January.

How many days or weeks or years have we spent simply "killing" time?
 (Now there's a phrase that probably has old Paul spinning in his grave).
 "Killing time" . . ."Wasting" time. . .or just "passing" time.

How many seconds, minutes and hours have we filled with empty activities,
 reading junky books, sucking up shallow and stupid values
 while sitting in front of a flickering box. . .
 or on the phone searching Google?
 How much time of the little we have left to us
 will we spend doing equally dumb things? Lord, have mercy!

Annie Dillard put it this way: *The enormous temptation in life is to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain—or Lazarus.*

Certainly that frivolous “waste of time” is another concern raised by Paul’s words today—
 words which are to act as a kind of spur prompting us, prodding us,
 into examining how we spend our time. . .
 and whether we are using this “non-renewable resource”
 wisely, thoughtfully, grace-fully, meaningfully, “Christ-ly”.

As the Anglican Bishop once said: **“Everywhere St. Paul went
 there was a revolution; everywhere I go, they serve tea.”**

But that careless and casual use of our time on this earth
 isn’t the only issue which springs from this lesson,
 nor was an urgency on my part to do my best to follow Christ today
 the main reason I told you the story of Kira.

For you see, there is another important point
 to be discovered in this text. . .and in Kira’s story. . .
 and it is not so much how we use time, but what our attitude should be
 toward time. . .and toward its rapidly-approaching end.

Listen once again to these words of Paul we heard earlier:

“. . .from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none,
 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,
 and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,
 and those who buy as though they had no possessions,
 and those who deal with the world
 as though they had no dealings with it.
 For the present form of this world is passing away.”

Or, to paraphrase Paul once more: “This world of ours as we know it. . .
 the world that we live in. . .will not last much longer.”

Strange words, aren’t they? What do you think they mean?

How do they make you feel? Comforted? Anxious? Uncertain? Upset?
 I mean, surely Paul isn’t advocating that people should stop making love,
 or that we should all become humourless, emotionless robots,
 empty of the desire to work or of the need to labour
 or to laugh or weep or to buy stuff for others to enjoy?
 Surely he didn’t mean that.

After all, even though Paul believed that Jesus was going to return within Paul’s own lifetime—
 even believing that, Paul would not encourage us, as God’s people,
 simply to opt out and drop out of life.

I mean, almost nowhere in Paul’s writings
 does he ever give the impression that this world is irrelevant or objectionable
 or a burden to put up with. . .nor that the Christian life is to be concerned
 only with the “spiritual” side of things.

On the contrary: For Paul, life in this world is to be seen as the arena
 in which we are called to bear the cross of Christ
 out of love for God and in service to others.

So we can hardly take these words as Paul giving his approval
 or his blessing to run away from life.

At the same time, however, although we are not to be completely concerned
 with “other-worldly” things—that is, concentrating only on heaven
 and our “personal evacuation plan” to get there. . .(as Richard Rohr puts it)--
 yet it is plain from Paul’s words that neither are we to commit ourselves
 completely and totally to this world. . .
 and to the values and standards and practices of our culture,
 or the economic or nationalistic plans spun by our leaders and authorities--
 because this rulers of this world and the rulers of this present age
 do not have the last word in life or on life. God does.

And so what I think Paul is saying here is that we are to approach life and time in this world--
 things like marriage, emotions, profit and loss—with a whole new kind of attitude. . .
 an attitude which says that finding a mate, or bearing and raising children,
 laughing at jokes or crying at funerals,
 or buying and selling goods and services—
 that these things of life are not ultimate—not ends in themselves. . .
 nor are they to consume our inner selves. . .our real selves.
 Instead, we are to look at life as a sort of journey
 toward a destination that is still to come.

We are to look at living on this earth, in this world, as if it were
 stopping for rest at a waystation on the road to the next world--the age to come.
 Now, that doesn’t mean viewing this world as horrible or evil
 or as something to avoid getting involved in at all costs.
 Indeed, this is God’s good world. . .a world God loves. . .
 and a world for which Christ gave his life out of love.

So, I rather think Paul’s words are meant to encourage us to look beyond this world—
 that is, to look past it or through it to the “other reality” behind it—
 not because this world is an awful place
 and our present lives are somehow a trial by fire
 or a testing ground for our faith or resolve. . .
 but because this world is not the last place where we will hang our hats.

And because this world is not the end. . .not our final destination. . .
 nothing in it should be allowed to stake its claim upon us
 for God already has a prior and primary claim on us.

In the same way, we are to let nothing in this world, or our lives,
 own or control or buy or sell us. . .and our souls. . .
 because God already owns and controls us--
 and our souls and hearts and minds belong to God.

In Christ, we have been bought for God's own
 and, in baptism, we have been granted citizenship in a new kingdom—
 God's new, present and still-to-come reign:
 A rule or dominion that is and can be seen and known
 already here-and-now because of Christ's presence
 in Word and Sacrament. . .and in us and others.

At the same time, while it is can be seen and found here-and-now,
 God's reign or rule or dominion is not yet here in all its fullness—
 that is, it is still or yet to come in all its glory and brilliance--
 which will be seen and be known when Christ returns—
 when he returns for us as individuals. . .or returns for all things. . .
 to restore all things. . .to make all things new again.

Therefore, because we already belong to the new age,
 our attitudes toward life in this old and fading age are to be different.
 After all, there is no point in building a brick home in a campground
 or planting a vegetable garden in a roadside rest area
 since the world as we know it is not going to last forever.

So, what it all boils down to is this:
 On the one hand, in obedience to God's word,
 we are to earnestly seek one another's company for worship;
 to be faithful in our relationships and friendships;
 to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh;
 and to serve and care for this world as good stewards of God's own creation. . .
 God's dearly-loved creation.

At the same time, we are to be aware that this world
 which God calls us to love and pray for and give our lives to—
 that this world is passing away. . .and so are we.

As a result, this world does not have. . .nor will it speak
 the last word on it or on us. God does and God will.
 And whether God allows that final word to be spoken
 through human foolishness in a nuclear conflagration
 or by means of some unexpected natural catastrophe
 or because of our lack of care for ourselves--
 no matter how or when or why that final word is spoken,
 we are to trust that it is God who will speak it. . .and that God's Presence—
 God's Spirit of truth and hope and life--that God's Loving Presence will accompany that word.

So, when God ends this world. . .or simply brings our worlds to an end—
God will do so in order to grant us new life—new life for new people
living and loving in God's new creation and new age—
where time and tears will be no more. . .

where you and I and Paul and Kira. . .
and that pastor's wife who died just a few months ago
with her husband holding her hand--
where we and she and he and they. . .
along with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. . .
will walk in the light and love and joy of God's own place forever and ever. Amen.

SDG