

When is your 'quality time'? Is it that time after the alarm goes off and before your feet actually hit the floor. Or is it in the coffee shop or sitting in front of TV or the Boxing Day sales? I would infer from the loyalty that curling players have for their game that quality time happens around a sheet of ice. A visibly elated senior couple explained to me that quality time began when their adult children moved away from home for the last time and the dog died.

For some, quality time is only in the past, "the good old days" when kids were polite, streets were safe and hamburger was \$.50 a pound. Others see quality time only in the future – when their ship comes in, when they get a raise and a promotion, when they get out of school, when they get married, when they retire. And still others have given up on any such thing as quality moments in time. Time is so burdensome that only when it is done away with can there be any peace; they fantasize mythical places where time does not exist: Nirvana, Shangri-La, Kitimat.

In the New Testament, two Greek words describe time. The first is *chronos*, used when one is referring to a quantity of time. Jesus' being about thirty years of age when he began his public ministry, is a reference to *chronos* time. The second word, *kairos*, is time in terms of quality. Our Galatians reading begins this morning, "But when the fullness of time had come..." and similarly, Luke 2:22 begins, "When the time came..." These references are to special moments in the course of time: quality time in the midst of ordinary time, fullness in the midst of emptiness of time, and time designated for something special. We vaguely know what time is but to define it is actually difficult. Augustine acknowledged the abstractness of time when he said, "I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled," (Confessions XI:14).

On this first Sunday of the year we are reminded of the *chronos* of time – exemplified as an old man borne down by the weight of time, sickle over his shoulder, long beard on his face – Father Time. That's time in the quantitative sense. But *kairos* is time filled with opportunity, portrayed by a young man with wings on his feet, a forelock of hair coming down across his brow. You grasp *kairos* – the quality moment – as it comes to you, for the back of the head is bald, indicating that once time is past it cannot be grasped. Our life is in some ways measured by what we do or do not do with those quality moments that come our way.

Arthur C. Clark, the noted science fiction author, once wrote an interesting article on time for *Horizon* magazine. The human being, he observed, is the only living being troubled by time. He then conjectured that from that concern about time the human spirit can go in one of two directions – a negative path where time exercises a tyranny over our lives: "Time to get up," "Time to do the laundry," or "Time to mow the lawn," "Time to go to the dentist," "Time to go to bed." Time is just something to get through and consequently, time drags. The other path in dealing with time, Arthur Clark notes, is to enjoy it, to master it, to make it a positive. From this approach comes humanity's great achievements, our finest art, a great deal of our religion, all of our science. This is "fullness of time" filled with accomplishment, time filled with reward.

Probably the creed of our day to day life is "Time's a wasting." We are always aware of the passing of time, the *chronos* years going by. We feel we should have achieved a certain level of accomplishment of quality of life by a certain age. Sarah is thirty and notes wistfully that she does not own a house, is not married, has not had children and already has had to change careers four times; it seems to her now that she has been wasting time and has not reached any of the goals that other thirty year olds have achieved. Yet whether we are on schedule for achieving, is a matter of perspective. That was my conclusion when I was once visiting a friend

in Toronto. We attended a poetry reading at which one of the featured readers was an eighty-something year old woman, who did not compose her first line of poetry until she was forty-five. Part of her message was that we all have kairos times to write about and we should not let our chronos time – too few years or too many years – limit our ability to see and name the kairos moments. I notice that this year's crop of Christmas letters from distant friends and relatives, all bemoan how busy everyone's year has been, and how little time they had for relaxing.

Of course if we look at time as something to be filled up, then the question of quality of time can be side stepped. Sometimes we rationalize the side step by saying the economy makes it necessary to be so busy. Young couples that want to be able to afford the kind of home that would be suitable to raise a family, feel the pressure of both seeking full time jobs if they want the dream to happen. Many people are attracted to the West Coast because of the mild climate and the many life style opportunities. But unless they arrived here with their fortune already made, they may find it "necessary" to work at a level that precludes finding the time to enjoy all those activities. The situation was similar during my ministry in Banff. Thousands of young people would arrive there for seasonal employment in the tourism industry, thinking that they were going to climb mountains, focus their lives and party. Because of the expense of living there it was usually necessary to work split shifts or to work two part time jobs. They never did climb that mountain or explore that "kairos" time they thought they had come for.

Economic necessity is often cited as the reason why our time has to be filled with so many things, yet even economic necessity involves a series of decisions based on certain values. We have chosen our tread mill, even if we complain that we must tread ever more quickly. E.B. White, the late essayist who contributed many articles to *The New Yorker*, wrote frequently on the subject of "time". One such essay is "The Ring of Time," which White wrote after he had strolled into a circus tent and happened to catch two performers practising. One was a woman in her forties, the other her adolescent daughter; the older woman was teaching the younger one the tricks of the trade. White watched, mesmerized by the young girl's beauty, but he was also acutely unhappy. The reason was that for an instant he saw her 25 years ahead, the image of her mother. "She will never be as beautiful as this again," White thought. "She's at that enviable moment in life when she believes she can go once around the ring, make one complete circuit, and at the end be exactly the same age as at the start."

Time can look deceptively the same. In another sense, you are profoundly different if you have experienced the death of a loved one, received a diagnosis of a serious disease, begun or ended a relationship or had a close call. Some things do happen that shatter the illusion that we can stay exactly the same as we were before. It may seem that today we will start the pattern of events just where we were on January 1, 2011 but we will never be at that moment again. And we will never be that person again. The Christmas event is about God entering our chronos time. We can count the years and determine that Jesus was born two thousand years ago. If God is going to be truly with us, then God needs to enter the world as we know it, being born at a particular time and place in human history. The number of years of Jesus' life on earth can also be measured as a span of thirty-three years. Not the length of Jesus' ministry but the kairos moments of God's kingdom that he made happen, are the reasons that the Christian faith has continued. In Jesus' parables and healings and in his sacrificial love on the Cross, we experience God's love being born into our moments of ordinary living, transforming them into moments of grace and wonder. God is with us in our time, breathing creativity and hope into what awaits us each day. God's love is born into our world at Christmas; such love points us to the same God who is born into our present moment. Each moment that we open our lives to the birth of God's Word transforming it, is a kairos moment. God asks us to be in time with God's time in this time. Thanks be to God. Amen.