

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 6 JANUARY 2008
Rev. Dr John Bodycomb
Ecclesiastes 6: 1-6; Matthew 6: 31-34

"When Time Takes Wing!"

As a boy I had holidays with paternal grandparents in Ballarat. The house was full of fascinating items, including an hour glass. It consisted of two glass bulbs, one above the other and connected by a thin tube. The top bulb was filled with fine sand, which ran through the tube into the bottom one. Once that happened, the hour glass could be turned upside down to repeat the process. I remember watching transfixed as the sand flowed and the level in the top bulb went down. When most had run through the tube to the bottom bulb, and there was little still in the top one, the level would fall faster – because it was in the narrow part.

The experience of time seeming to go by either more slowly or more quickly is a common one. Last week-end I was in Adelaide for my son's 50th birthday. Two of his sisters from Melbourne were there, and two of their daughters. We had a chat around the table about this experience of time seeming to go slowly or quickly, and in particular seeming to go more quickly when we are older. I told them I'd had sundry chats with folk who said, "I don't know what has happened since mid-year. Christmas seems to have jumped out of nowhere!" Why should time seem to pass quickly?

My grand-daughters had a theory. They said for them it had to do with whether or not you were enjoying an activity. "If you don't enjoy it, it seems to take for ever. If it's fun, the time can go by very quickly indeed." I thought back to when our own were small. I remember calling them away from TV to finish chores, and the protest. "Oh, why? We just came in here!" "Yes, an hour ago." I remember them a little younger, in the car and fifteen minutes away from home, saying, "Aren't we there yet?" Time seemed to fly when they were doing something enjoyable, and to drag when it was something they didn't enjoy.

I am reminded of the elder who found sitting through sermons a bit of a drag. At three or four minute intervals he would ostentatiously take from his waistcoat pocket a large gold watch on a chain, and then after fifteen minutes shake it violently after first holding it up to his ear. Story has it that the minister got the message. I think my granddaughters' theory is good as far as it goes, but there could be more going on – especially with time seeming to 'take wing'.

I

My first theory is 'beagling'. Frequent changes of focus: attention diverted from one thing to another to another. '**Beagling**' comes from living now with one of these fascinating animals. With an incredibly strong sense of smell, and obsessive tracking instinct, if Ben were let off the lead, we could find him days or weeks later at Mount Baw Baw or Broome.

An old school mate has sent me this story of AAADD (Age Activated Attention Deficit Disorder). He says this is how it manifests.

I decide to water my garden. As I pull my hose up the drive, I look over at the car and am reminded that it needs washing. When I turn to the car port, I notice mail on the porch table that I brought in earlier from the box. I decide to read this before washing the car. I put car keys on the table, toss

the junk mail in a bin under it, and see that it is full. So I leave the bills on the table to take out the rubbish first. But then I think I'll get my cheque book and fix those bills now. I find there's only one cheque in the book, so I go to my filing cabinet for the new one I got last week. As I go into the house, I find the can I'd been drinking when I decided to water the garden. I go to move it to make space for writing those cheques, and decide to put it back in the frig. As I head for the kitchen, a vase of flowers in the hall catches my eye; they look thirsty. I put my drink on the table and find the specs I'd been looking for. I know they're better on my desk, but first I'll fix that flower vase. I put my specs down, go for a jug of water and spot the TV remote control. Someone has left it on the kitchen table. I realise that when we watch TV tonight, we'll be looking for the remote and probably won't remember it's in the kitchen, so I decide to put it back in the den where it belongs. But first, those flowers. I pour water in the vase, and some overflows. I put down the TV remote and get a towel to wipe up. Then I head down the hall trying to remember what I was going to do.

At the end of the day the car isn't washed, the bills aren't paid, there's a warm can of drink out there, the flowers are drooping, there's still only one cheque in my cheque book, I can't find the remote, I can't find my specs and I forget what I did with the car keys. When I try to figure out why nothing got done today, I'm puzzled because I know I was busy all day, and I'm really tired. Don't laugh. If this isn't you yet, your day is coming! So much for AAADD (age activated attention deficit disorder) – or 'beagling' if you prefer. It may help explain this sense of time racing by with little to show for it.

II

My second theory has to do with what we can call the **balance remaining**. When you're twenty, you think of the horizon that awaits us being fifty, sixty, seventy years away. There's a lot more time left. You don't need to hurry. At seventy, or eighty, there's an awareness that the balance is dwindling.

One of my circle showed me a sad letter from a mutual friend. He has been an inveterate traveller, writing the most absorbing accounts of places he visited, and illuminating these with quite stylish pen and wash sketches. He has never published, but after some pestering from family, he has decided to put together a collection of this material, along with some new stuff to give the project some continuity. He still lives independently in a small cottage, and is having a sleepout modified to serve as a kind of studio. He is in early 80s, and quite fit.

Although he is normally a placid bloke, the letter betrayed a sense of urgency bordering on the frantic. He wanted to move into this new working space before Christmas, but couldn't get tradespeople. He offered extra money, but they laughed; they wanted holidays. He admitted to being almost beside himself over this delay. It didn't fit with the man we remembered. Then he explained why. He has been diagnosed with macular degeneration, and every day counts if he is to sketch again. The macula is the inner lining of the eye. As we age it can undergo thinning, atrophy, even bleeding. This causes loss of central vision, inability to see fine details, to read, even to recognise faces.

No longer did he have years to finish his project; perhaps not even months. He wrote, "I began the writing a month ago, but need my new space for drawing. Now I can't see so well; the time is rushing by and my sight going with it!" Maybe when we're getting older, and still have much we want to do, the passage of time can seem to be accelerating.

III

There is one other angle I want to touch on: what I would call the **burden of guilt** theory. This is not so much about things we *want* to do, but things we feel we *ought* to do. This can be a recipe for trouble.

It has become unfashionable to talk about sin and guilt, about judgement and punishment. These ideas were more common in our youth, and still are in some traditions, but have been played down in our own. But time was when they were the stock in trade of evangelists. I remember as a boy hearing the acclaimed Lionel B Fletcher, Australia's own hell-fire and brimstone orator. He didn't convert me, but he scared the devil out of me. Billy Graham dated his conversion to the mission of legendary tent preacher Mordecai Ham. Billy sat in the far back row; yet swore Ham was looking straight at him when he thundered, "There is a terrible young sinner in this place, for whom God is right now stoking the fires of hell. God knows who he is, and is waiting for him. But there is still time to repent."

Even though we don't trade much in that kind of talk, some of us are quite able to look back with some regrets, and wonder if there is time to make a better mark on the world. There can be memories of missed opportunities, memories of things done and things left undone, and the wish to go out with a bang if we can. That is fine, but guilt is seldom inspiring and empowering. On the contrary, it commonly makes people feel despondent. There will never be enough time to make up for what they have done or not done.

Conclusion

So, how do we deal with all this? One of the bible's least-read books offers a clue. I refer to Ecclesiastes, that wisdom teaching with a sardonic streak. The passage we read says it's not how long we have but what we do with it that matters. You can have endless time, but still miss out on quality of life. The old sage says you can live to be two thousand years old, have a hundred kids and be rich and powerful – but still be miserable. Jesus died at thirty-three, but arguably is still the most influential human being that ever lived. It's not how long we have left, but what we do with it. "Carpe diem!" (seize the day) as the Roman poet Horace wrote.

Close to the end of her 96 years, Mother and I were chatting about matters of belief, which I found to hold surprisingly little interest for her. She said, "I think we are meant to do the best we know how, to live one day at a time, and to leave the rest to the Eternal." And then I think of Jesus saying to his friends, "Don't worry and don't keep saying 'what shall we eat and drink and wear? That's what pagans are always looking for; your heavenly father knows that you need them all. Set your heart on his kingdom and his goodness . . . Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow can take care of itself."