

CHRIST CHURCH WOODBURY

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25th April 2021

If I could turn back time

Stephen – Acts 6-7 (Acts 6: 1-5a; 7: 51-60)

When Cher was first played the track 'If I could turn back time' she totally disliked it. Cher had had a string of hits in the first nine years of her career but the 1989 release of If I Could Turn Back Time finally became the major comeback hit she had strived 15 years for.

To comeback and have that success Cher had to turn things around, make some changes, listen to others, admit that her instinct on that comeback song was wrong, and revert to some of what had made her who she was before.

I wonder if Cher felt alternately powerful and powerless as she looked back over some of what appeared to be the fallow or wasted periods of time in her life.

The language that we use about time reveals something about us I think. Important (or self-important) people have many "demands" on their time. They "buy" time, as if time were something you could order online. They "spend" time like a currency of exchange. They "use" time like a garden implement. Sometimes they "invest" time, or "put time aside" as if for a favour for something or someone.

"Don't lose precious time", they tell you; but if they like you they will "find" time to see you. Every time they look for a new gadget their first question is whether it will "save" time. It is never clear how they "spend" the time that these gadgets have "saved". What you must never do though is "waste" their time. They make some time more important and valuable than others – their time, of course. Hence the expression "quality time". Quality time is presumably something you buy at Waitrose rather than Lidl.

All of these idioms for engaging time culminate when the breathless manager reminds the staff that "time is money". Now at last it makes sense to talk of saving, wasting, spending, investing and putting aside time, because time is money. And money apparently gets you everything life has to offer – hence the language of buying, and of quality, time.

By contrast, there is another group of people. Their time is not in hot demand. It is not in short supply. Because they are not in a hurry they are considered by the first group to be "time wasters". They are "losing precious time" in life's rat race. By the standards of measuring time as money or as the commodity money can buy, these people are poor. However, the irony is that they have an abundance of what the powerful people seem constantly to be short of – time. Nonetheless, they very often see the world as the powerful see it, and thus they see their situation as a bad one. They quickly come to see time as an enemy, and they frequently use battle language as a result. Time is "against" them, or "presses in on" them; it "weighs heavy" on their lives. They seem to be failing the "test" of time.

And yet time past and time future are both hugely significant. Take the season of advent, which celebrates the life changing news from the past that Christ has come, and also the most important news about the future – that Jesus is coming again. So too lent, where we take a step back to remove ourselves from the normal stuff of life in order to take the time

to remember that the busy activities of our day to day are not the most important thing. Lent is a period of fasting, repentance, moderation, self-denial and spiritual discipline before the celebration of Jesus's death and resurrection. It gives us the opportunity to truly turn back the times of our life to their author.

I wonder how you have found the enforced time of Lockdown. God willing, we are coming to its end but, maybe now and most certainly in the years to come, when you turn back to lockdown time what will you see that time as being for you and for those around you? Which part of Cher's experiences will you have? More importantly, which part of God's? One of the things I observe is that on the face of it we each had very few choices about what we could do with our time as we entered lockdown. In fact we had many, and many of them then counted for eternity as we worked out and lived out what the church scattered, what each of us being a mustard seed for Jesus, really meant. Yet now I see and hear far more noise and confusion and uncertainty and mental health challenges. We are faced with choices. How much of time do we turn back? What of our previous personal, family, work, church, rest of our lives do we choose to return to, modify, forget, replace? 2021 really will be a moment when we will have to turn back time and be accountable for the choices we make.

Looking at Jesus, living with him, provides us with the opportunity to learn everything we need to about the character and nature of God, about his desire for relationship with each of us, and of how friendship can be restored and made the best part of our time on this earth. Because our time is now. We live in the "mean" time. The curious thing of this lockdown period has perhaps been though that no one seems to be too happy with the meantime. The powerful people say "Life's too short". The powerless people say "How long, O Lord, how long?"

What Jesus does by showing us the end of the world is to make time a gift and a friend. This applies to us in this past year - in spite maybe of the past events of our lives - and as we open up to new choices and freedoms again. Time is a gift and a friend. Time is a gift because we live in God's time, not our own. Time can never belong to us; it isn't ours. It always still belongs to God. He gives it and he takes it away. Time is "on our side". Time is the word for the existence that God continues to give us and that we can never own. As we have observed recently in reflecting on the long life of Prince Phillip, even those who serve and live royal existences never own the expanse of time that they will have on this earth. You may not have all the time you want. But you have all the time you need.

The question is, what will you do with the time that you have been gifted. Time, you see, is a friend. Time is a friend because we have nothing to fear from what God has in store for us. The face we see on the judgment seat when our time on this earth is no more will be the very same face we have seen hanging on the cross for each one of us. Judgment Day may spring some surprises, but it will bring no shocks. We have seen God's character, and it is not going to change. He has always said and shown that he loves us, has compassion for us, that we are never so prodigal that he won't have us as his son or daughter, that his heart doesn't hurt when we hurt, or that there is ever anything that we can do that will make him turn his back on us.

So, actually if she hadn't to date chosen to live life on her own terms, instead of living her time for God, Cher needn't have worried when she sung:

"I don't know why I did the things I did
I don't know why I said the things I said
Pride's like a knife, it can cut deep inside

Words are like weapons, they wound sometimes

I didn't really mean to hurt you

I didn't wanna see you go

I know I made you cry."

The reason she needn't have felt so helpless and hopeless is because Jesus has already carried all of that pain, and more, so she needn't feel that there is no way out.

Stephen, who we read about earlier, also had plenty of reasons to cry out. He was the first man who was martyred for being a Christian. In fact, in the space of two chapters he went from the ultimate hero to the absolute zero (if your frame of reference is what the world around us thinks). The question is, who sets your standards: our modern culture, or the perspective of eternity. Regardless of the state of his circumstances, Stephen's song was like that old classic "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace"

What is the song of your life right now? Is it Cher's or is it Stephen's?

Cher sang:

"My world was shattered, I was torn apart

Like someone took a knife and drove it deep in my heart."

The words of Cher's song point to some of the pain of our world, of the feelings that are evoked when we helplessly or shamefully turn back time. Stephen on the other hand spends the bulk of these two chapters turning back time in an entirely different way. As he does so we hear the history of how over time the forefathers had been protected by God, had known God, had learned to love and rely on him, and how God alone had stood the test of time.

We too are in a moment of history. In years and generations to come those who come after us will turn back time and see what we did with what we have. Our choice is what to do with the gift of the time God has given to us. God would say to you that this is a powerful moment and question in your life right now.

You see, if we have God's perspective on time, time is our friend. We can enjoy time with those who do not promise to make the world a better place. We can be with prisoners, with young children, with the homeless, the very elderly, the poor, the refugee and the oppressed – for that is where God spends his time. Every bit of time we spend with a powerless person is part of us as God's presence proclaiming Gospel hope. And if it takes all the time in the world, it doesn't matter – because it is God's time. And God gives us time to do as he would with it.

Stephen only appears in the Bible in these chapters. Here's what turning back time to the beginning of chapter 6 tells us marked him out: "Choose seven from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn responsibility over to them. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Note too that they did choose well – subsequently, the word of God spread; disciples increased as did the number of new believers).

Stephen – who turning back time tells us was 'known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom'. What will you be known to have been when the time of your life is turned back in the years to come?

Cher could only say:

"If I could turn back time, if I could find a way

I'd take back those words that've hurt you, you'd stay
If I could reach the stars, I'd give them all to you
Then you'd love me, love me, like you used to do.
But I lost everything, then and there
Too strong to tell you I was sorry
Too proud to tell you I was wrong
I know that I was blind."

Stephen in ch7:51 speaks to the pride and pain of people who are stuck with the legacy of words such as Cher's. He says: "You stiff necked people. You always resist the Holy Spirit!" I wonder what he would say to you today?

Then, faced with the anger and oppression of those for whom time was for their own pleasure and purpose and gain and who ultimately presented Stephen with the threat of impending death, Stephen showed each one of us the better way. He was full of the Holy Spirit, he looked up to heaven, he saw the glory of God, and saw Jesus who had died for him and prepared his ultimate way, and saw heaven open before him, welcoming him in.

Will you look up. Will you see God's glory. Will you share what Jesus has done for you. Will you live these times in the light and certainty of knowing your ultimate home? Or will you lose everything by being too strong, not saying sorry, being too proud to say you have done and been wrong? Will you be stiff necked and proud, or bowed down and a humble servant?

Can I urge you to give God some time alone with you. Invest that time for you to have Stephen's perspective. A perspective that says regardless of what I am going through in this life there is a higher and greater purpose that I cannot see. To be so close to God that even if you were or are in a period of what feels like torture you would see things through the eyes of a heavenly father who cares even for those who are doing the equivalent of stoning you. And to then pray like Stephen did for the ones causing you the seemingly impossible grief - "Lord do not hold this against them."

Perhaps you have felt like a martyr at some time in your life. Maybe now

Whatever persecution you have endured take heart - whatever happens in your story, God wins

The times after the unjust death of Stephen should give us hope. When Stephen was martyred others became more passionate and diligent in doing the mission of God. Phillip made an unprecedented evangelistic journey into Samaria. After that, we read in ch11:19 that the followers of Stephen travelled far and wide to take the good news of Jesus to those who had not yet heard it.

Stephen didn't wail 'If I could turn back time". Even in the midst of getting pelted to his death with rocks he kneels down and cries out to God to forgive the people stoning him. Time for him was God's alone.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Forget yourself. Do like Jesus on the cross, and Stephen here, and leave the stuff of this life, the hurt, in God's hands. Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Come out of this lockdown time creating your song as God's song, so that when others turn back the pages of your life in the generations to come, they will know that in the time God gave you you made a difference for eternity, and that your time - like Stephen's - really, really counted.