

*Joseph's Kairos encounter* Advent 4, 23 December 2007

*Isaiah 7:10-16; Ps. 80:1-7,17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25*

Advent is probably my favourite liturgical season. Maybe it's that sense of movements happening beneath the surface of things — of new beginnings; of a deep story long in the making, and prophecies on the verge of being fulfilled; of impending change with an air of mystery about it. At the same time, I like the penitential aspect of Advent too — that annual reminder that I need to change, and that this is in my own interests. I have even reached the point of finding John the Baptist's rather austere call that I repent, change and transform, a strangely refreshing antidote to all the shallow, self-indulgence messages in so much of life 'out there', which are really starting to grate. Advent also carries the idea that in order to really hear the subtle and beautiful message bound up in the Nativity, I need to prepare myself, to clear my inner decks, so as to let something happen to me at a deeper level.

And maybe more tellingly, I have only discovered all this by actually having participated in it all for many years — of having lived through many Advent Seasons where the stories are gently told and retold, and the messages gently given in many different ways — including in music. There are some capacities and sensibilities that simply cannot be gained other than through living them out over time.

And so it's about time itself, that I'd mainly like to talk about today as we reflect on our Gospel reading about Joseph in the final countdown to the Nativity which, as we all know, is now just two sleeps away.

As you probably know, the New Testament was written in the Greek language. One of the things about Greek is that it has some words and ideas that don't translate overly naturally into English. You probably know, for example, that Greek has three, maybe four, much more precise words for the wide range of things we call "love".

Greek also has two words for the English word "time". The first of these is the word *kronos*. It corresponds pretty closely to our normal modern Western sense of time, and is used for all instances of clock or calendar time. It's from *kronos* that we get English words like chronology. *kronos* is normal sequential time. The events of our lives, like being born, growing up, getting jobs, growing old, and dying, all sit in a stream — a flow of external, measurable *kronos* time — in a stream of seconds like little pods holding the moments of our lives, tick-tocking away.

In fact, I reckon that this *kronos* perspective is in fact the modern West view of time. It has become progressively reinforced by our sciences (especially physics), our view of what makes for objective history and so on.

We have lost, or are rapidly losing, any real sense of the other view of time that was part of our cultural heritage.

The second Greek word for, and understanding of, time was called *kairos* (k-a-i-r-o-s). The word *kairos* is not particularly easy for us to understand partly because it is quite different from our ordinary *kronos* notions, but also because even in Greek it is a rich and complex word with many meanings. Maybe its basic meaning, though, is that of subjective time. *Kairos* has the sense of the way events feel; of their inherent significance or importance; and

also that sense we sometimes get about the timing of an event. *Kairos* also has strong connotations of opportunity, and of the mysterious, or the epic. My personal favourite way of thinking of *kairos* is to think of it as story time : this thing worth talking about happened, then that happened. They all started "once upon a time" — or once upon a *kairos* if you will.

If that's not all entirely clear, then maybe another way of getting into this *kronos vs kairos* distinction is to look at a more extreme example closer to home. If we modern Australians live with an overwhelmingly *kronos* view of time, then our predecessors in this land, the aborigines, had an overwhelmingly *kairos* one. As I understand it, the aborigines generally saw existence as coming out of, and being part of, what is now called in English 'the Dreaming', or 'Dreamtime'. The Dreaming for the Aborigines was at least as real as the physical sensory reality 'out there'. The aborigines called it the 'all-at-once' time instead of the 'one-thing-after-another' time.

In fact, they thought that they were born with an eternal Dreaming aspect to themselves and at their death returned to the Dreaming, which was seen as the past, present and future coexisting — or 'everywhen' as one commentator has neatly called it. The Dreaming view of things was underpinned by a rich collection of shared stories, all charged with sacred significance, and which all had a kind of "once upon a time" character. What then was of particular interest to the aborigines was taking the opportunities when they came up to get in touch with the sacred and the Dreaming stories.

I don't know whether any of you remember the old 1970s film by Peter Weir called *The Last Wave* but it begins with a quotation that summarises all this very nicely :

Aboriginals believe in two forms of time. Two parallel streams of activity. One is the daily objective activity ... The other is an infinite spiritual cycle called the "dreamtime," more real than reality itself. Whatever happens in the dreamtime establishes the values, symbols, and laws of Aboriginal society. Some people of unusual spiritual powers have contact with the dreamtime.

Now, I am not suggesting that we should all become Aborigines, or anything. In fact, I suspect that the Dreaming view of things came about in part because the events of a hunter-gatherer tribe's life didn't really need a *kronos* view.

But I do think we do have things to learn from them. I reckon the modern West has gone too far the other way and has fallen into the trap of thinking that *kronos* time is all there is to reality, which is one reason I think lots of people think they can't tune into religion. That's why the Greek, and for that matter Hebrew, view of things are of so much use to us. They, coming from cultures that were kind of half way between the ancient hunter-gatherer ones, and our modern one — still have a balance seeing both forms of time and the worth in each.

Regaining a *kairos* perspective on time is also critical if we want to understand many aspects of our own religion — because *kairos* is the medium of the Holy Spirit. For example, when at the beginning of St Mark's Gospel Jesus comes out of the wilderness and starts his ministry by saying "the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the Good News", the Greek word translated here as 'time', is in fact *kairos*. So when Jesus says that in him the *kairos* is fulfilled, we need a sense of epic, and of an opportunity, and of this being the 'right' time, or else we trivialise the Gospel message.

With that rather long backgrounder let's now turn today's Gospel story. In St Matthew's Gospel, maybe a little surprisingly, the very first character to walk onto the stage is not Jesus or even John the Baptist, it's Jesus' adoptive father-to-be, Joseph. Joseph seems to be living out an ordinary, unremarkable kind of life, presumably seeing the passage of his life through the kind of ordinary *kronos* lenses that we mainly see ours. Anyway, we learn he is engaged to a very young woman called Mary and he has a pretty serious problem to deal with : he has just found Mary is pregnant, and he knows he isn't the father. Because he's a decent kind of chap, Joseph thinks about it and he decides that he won't have her publicly punished as was his right, but rather he will quietly dismiss her.

Difficult situations, socially and morally, do come up in our ordinary day-to-day surface lives — and they do need thinking through. I reckon Joseph's answer was pretty good. I hope I would behave as well in the same circumstances. But that said, Joseph's answer was also rather conventional. It's the kind of thing that might be expected as one experiences the surface flow of life through *kronos* time.

What happens next is the first of many remarkable intersections of *kronos* and *kairos* events in the Gospels. We are specifically told that : 'just when he had resolved to do this' (dismiss Mary) — in other words at a *kronos* point — he has a dream, and is suddenly told that he is about to become the adoptive father, and namer, of the Messiah of Israel.

Wow. Actually, this isn't so much an intersection of the *kronos* and *kairos*, it's more like an eruption of *kairos*. Joseph's previous conventional ways of looking at his problem have been completely shown up, and blown apart, by the equivalent of the Hebrew Dreaming surging up and grabbing him. In fact, you could almost say that this was literally the Hebrew Dreaming because he finds out about the new perspective in a dream. And, interestingly, have you noticed what time is actually like in dreams, and how it runs?

Let's put ourselves in Joseph's situation. You are dreaming and suddenly an angel is telling you that the child of your fianc, e is actually from God and is the long awaited Messiah, and your appointed role is to marry Mary, name the child Jesus, and give him his descent from King David. What would you do? Would you believe the dream enough to do all this?

Joseph's time of decision is in itself a *kairos* moment — an opportune moment, part of a sacred drama. Joseph made a choice to participate in the Christ story, to enable it to happen in one sense, and in doing so has become part of our Dreaming — just look at any Roman Catholic bookstore!

Of course, the event that we remember in two days time is a much bigger one. The Incarnation is itself a *kairos* event writ about as large as they come. It may have happened 2000 years ago in *kronos* time, but surely it is also an eternal *kairos* one too. The very fact of the Incarnation is a paradox — it speaks of the way *kairos* and *kronos* interact. The whole point of the Incarnation is the way *kairos* enters into *kronos* : the word, the story, the Dreaming, enters into normal time as a person.

And maybe that is the way things always have to be. In St John's Gospel Jesus famously made the cryptic remark that "before Abraham was, I am". That almost sounds like that aboriginal idea of the Dreaming, of being everywhen, outside *kronos* time. In fact, in my book, 'eternity' is a *kairos* idea, not a *kronos* one — eternal life for me is not so much the idea that I will have a conventional existence forever in a *kronos* stream of time after I die, it's

more that 'I' (whatever that idea really means) will get to participate fully in God's reality which is outside our ordinary notions of time.

That said, of course we do live out our existences in ordinary *kronos* time. So even if we are willing to countenance this unfamiliar idea, what do we practically do with this notion of extraordinary *kairos* time? How are we supposed to grow into eternal life?

Well, maybe one thing to do is to first recognise, as the Greeks and Hebrews did, that *kairos* and *kronos* time do intersect. As Ecclesiastes famously says (using the Hebrew equivalent of *kairos*) everything has its Season. But there is an art to feeling how this happens. Maybe that's another way of saying that we need to learn how to listen for the Holy Spirit at work blowing on us, gracing our lives, making us glow at unexpected times.

But we can also prepare ourselves — to try and keep a little piece of Advent with us throughout the rest of the year. Some ideas for helping this include developing a capacity for stillness, because that helps develop our sensibility to listen for the *kairos* nature of events in the present moment. Also, we need to, a bit like the aborigines, immerse ourselves in our own sacred stories. It's these that give us the inner landscape to relate to the bigger view of things. Our gospels were not given to us as a redemption theory or philosophy. They were given to us as deep stories. And there is of course also prayer, a mindset of faith and faithfulness and of repentance — of wanting to transform in God.

And last, but not least, there is also maybe learning the art — and it is an art — of feeling our way into the eternal in the everyday. The modern Anglo-American poet, and high profile Anglican convert, T.S. Eliot said this in a late poem *Four Quartets*:

Time past and time future  
Allow but a little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered.  
—T.S. Eliot. *Four Quartets*.

Our deeper places, our souls, move on a different time scale to our busy, and shallow, senses and our rapidly darting, thinking minds. We need to learn how to sense those deeper currents under the shallows and ripples and eddies of surface experience — and feel our way into the deeper patterns at work in the stories of our lives, in our culture and in the fabric of existence itself.

Needless to say this topic of time is huge and rather mysterious. So, if what I have been talking about sounds a bit too, well, abstruse :- ) then maybe I should leave you with a more down-to-earth with a quotation from the late Fr. John Main who said this at the end of an Advent many years ago :

As the four week period of preparation for Christmas draws to a close and we approach the feast itself I would like you to know that we wish you much joy and deeper peace as we are led more deeply into the mystery of the Lord's birth. Our period of preparation for celebrating

the mystery is itself a joyful time, because there is a quietly deepening understanding of whose birth it is we celebrate and just how eternal an event is involved. Each year, it seems to me, the mystery of this birth becomes greater and yet the greater it grows, the closer it seems to come to us. In a society that seems to have lost so much of its capacity for peace and so much of the peacefulness needed to prepare quietly for anything, we run the risk of being left only with the worship of the instantly visible, the immediately possessed, of being left finally only with the dryness of the instantly forgotten. . If we are to know the truly spiritual quality of Christmas, the meaning of our celebration and ritual at home or in worshipping communities, we have to know what it means to enter the space where celebration becomes possible with prepared and peaceful hearts . As we prepare, and as our more materialistic expectations and possessiveness drop away, it dawns on us that the great event we are preparing for has preceded us. The great liturgy has begun in spirit and in truth. (John Main — The Present Christ, p.33)

With that, can I wish us all a sacred, peaceful and joyful Christmas Season. May the remembrance of the birth of our Lord touch us all in the deep places of our souls.

Glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.

Suggested further reading see Mark Freier (2006) "Time Measured by Kairos and Kronos"  
<http://www.whatifenterprises.com/whatif/whatiskairos.pdf>