

SERMON FOR NEW YEAR'S EVE | 31.12.2017

Did anyone else get a book to read for Christmas? What did you get?

My book this year was Roddy Doyle's 'Smile'. Despite the title it is a dark story of life in an Irish secondary school in the 1960s and as with so many of Doyle's books, you never quite know how much of it is autobiographical. Either way it is a book to make you think.

The great thing about a book is that it can mess with Time and as we end one year and start another, we are likely to be doing a bit of that today. We look back over 2017 and certain big headlines stand out – not the stuff in the newspapers so much but our own headlines, about people and events and health and dreams fulfilled – or not. Certain events will stand out easily while we may need someone to prompt us to remember the smaller details. And in the end we will try to make a judgement: was 2017 a good year or a bad year? Are we glad to see the back of it or were there a good number memories to treasure?

For some there will be a bit of anxiety associated with all of this: have I used the time I have had for the best? Take a quick look at a book of quotations and the anxiety grows!

In the pages on time, for example, we all know: *Time waits for no one* (although we don't know where it came from; Chaucer quotes it). But what about Jean Racine's *There are no secrets that time does not reveal* or Parkinson's law: *Work expands to fill the time available. This is shown in the phrase 'It is the busiest man who has time to spare'*. The Book of Common Prayer warns us that *man that is born of woman has a short time to live* but St Paul is more upbeat when he writes to the Corinthians *Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation...*

Which only goes to show that we use the word Time in a number of different ways. It isn't just about the progress of one year to another, it is also about the way we manage our lives and the value we put on certain activities. How often we say about chores we don't want to do – *O that was a waste of time* – while we quite happily spend time on things that please us without a second thought.

At this time of the year especially, I guess that the key question about the use of our time revolves around how well we have got on with the people we live with and especially the ones we are closest to. Gary Chapman, an American sociologist, has spent his whole career teaching five principles which he believes are the key tests of the way we show heartfelt commitment to those we love - five ways in which we express and experience love.

They are: gift giving, spending quality time together, purposefully telling someone that you love them, doing practical things which you know they value and finally, physical touch.

Over Christmas those five things activities have certainly come to the fore for many of us – sadly, often making up for those times when the busyness of life has more or less squeezed them out!

But before we think we are just reading yet another Mindfulness book in Waterstones, as Christians we might just take a slightly deeper look at what this all means. For whatever else Christmas is – a time of family celebration and the renewal of our links with all kinds of other people who matter to us – it is, first and foremost, the time when God reminds us just how much he loves us.

While in the past he talked to us through the prophets who spoke of their hopes for the future, Christmas says: *in your time and in your experience I am sending my Son to be with you.* No longer are we alone: love came down at Christmas – in the form of a vulnerable child – because God was prepared to take the risk of entrusting us with his wisdom, truth and love. In Gary Chapman's terms here is his first principle: gift.

So what about the other four: quality time, verbal expressions of love, practical service and physical touch?

Actually they are all there in Church life too - if we are prepared to make them happen. Quality time in prayer, both in Church and at home; verbal expressions through the songs of praise we offer together; practical service can take all kinds forms and will be different for each of us but will involve putting God before ourselves: and finally every time we put our hands out to receive his Body and Blood in Holy Communion, we remember this is not just head stuff but involves our physical bodies too.

We need, though, to go one stage deeper still. For we know that the time and attention we give to loving someone is not just to make sure that they love us. Love, as we all know, gives without counting the cost. We don't love people in order for them to be a certain way or to give something back: we love – whatever the outcome - and even if there is no outcome at all.

Which is why I want to share this quite remarkable 'Covenant Prayer' today. Originally drawn from the Methodist Tradition it has become much more widely known in recent years.

The reason is because it has at its heart the idea that our personal Time is not really our own at all, it belongs to God. Whatever we think we should expect in return for all our efforts is just our own hope for recognition and thanks – and has nothing whatever to do with God's much bigger canvass:

I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me,
in all that I do and in all that I may endure;
when there is work for me and when there is none;
when I am troubled and when I am at peace.
Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;
when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking;
when I have all things and when I have nothing.
I willingly offer all that I have and am to serve you, as and when you choose.
Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever.
Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

Better still if we can hold that alongside today's Gospel, then we will have gone a long way to make Gary Chapman's five principles into something liberating too. For what Jesus comes to offer us is the freedom that comes from knowing that when we give – completely, wholeheartedly and without hope of reward – we can then relax and stop worrying. We do what we can – and we leave the rest into the hands of our loving Father who will finally fit each of our individual jigsaw pieces into his bigger picture.

So to finish and as we start the New Year, I offer you the words of this prayer - alongside the Gospel and in tandem with famous words of Minnie Haskins as quoted by King George VI: *And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied: Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than any known way.*