

Study 2

Until Evening

'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.' (Matthew 6:34)

Opening Up

How easy is to let calendars on phones and devices rule our daily lives such that it causes stress and anxiety, and should they have an option of 'around about' when arranging a time?



Sundial, 1725, St Ishmael's Church, S Wales, pic John Birch

A New Day

(Read John 11:9)

It may well be the sun that marked out the length of a working day for our ancient ancestors, but there is evidence that 30,000 or more years ago the face of the moon (which changes nightly and seasonally) was also marking people's time. Lunar calendars etched into animal bones may have been used for hunting trips.

Neither the cycles of nature or the planets and stars can give the accuracy that we rely on today, with the division of a day into hours and minutes. For that we may have to thank the Egyptians, who took the concept of a simple sundial (literally a stick in the ground) and developed it such that it could divide the interval between sunrise and sunset into 12 parts, though this would be approximate, as summer hours are longer than winter hours.

The ancient workday was one of three-hour segments. In the days of the ancient Greeks

and Romans they divided the period of total darkness into either 3 or 4 'night watches' but eventually split it into 12 divisions following patterns in the stars.

A fixed length for hours developed by Greek astronomers in the period 300-30 BC was helpful but rarely used by ordinary people. This only became commonplace in the 14th century after the development of mechanical clocks, closely followed by the use of minutes. Time was getting more precise!

So, this is the world of our Bible, with a somewhat more relaxed understanding of the division of a day than we have today.



Discussion

- Q) How do you imagine Jesus and his disciples organising their daily itinerary?

- Q) Why do you think there might have been, in the past, a reluctance in society to see the day divided up into fixed-length hours?

- Q) The sundial depicted on the last page appeared to be between 15-17 minutes slow based on GMT and a digital watch. What does that say about us and the people of 1725?

Hours for Work and Prayer

(Read Matthew 20:1-16, Acts 3:1, Daniel 6:10)

The passage from Matthew seemed appropriate when thinking about the division of the day into hours, as it is a story about working hours and an employer who hires men from the employment queue from 6am one morning. We see the traditional three hourly divisions of the day in the recruitment of additional casual workers from the marketplace. Following correct procedure, they pay those hired last first, and it is only when those hired first receive their previously agreed wage that they grumble and complain that they should surely get more than those hired at 5 o'clock.

It is only a story, but possibly one that resonates with our own working lives, if we work alongside others apparently doing less and being paid the same or more.

But Jesus' point is really a lesson on gratitude and motivation, not about reward for work done. It is also not about a reward of salvation (which works do not earn). It's a parable like that of the Prodigal Son, whose brother complains to his father about the expense of the welcome home feast when the Prodigal returns.

We judge by human values, and God's generosity sometimes exceeds our human understanding.

The verses from Acts and Daniel put the prayer life of the devout Jew into the context of the day. The regular hours were three; the first coinciding with the morning sacrifice, at the 3rd hour (9 am), the second at the sixth hour (noon) and the third with the evening sacrifice at the ninth hour (3 pm). God's people knew that every hour was a gift from God!

Discussion

- Q) Is the story of the hired worker an easy one to understand, and if not, is it purely a cultural issue or what else that might make it difficult for us?

- Q) The regular hours of prayer (three or sometimes more) that we find in our Bibles are part of the daily liturgy of many Christian denominations, along with monastic groups and individuals. Is this a habit that needs encouraging?

- Q) How easy do you find it to set aside time in the day for prayer?

The Hours of Daylight

(Read Exodus 20:8-11, Matthew 6:25-34, John 11:8-11, John 9:4-5, Acts 2:17-18)

There are over 1800 references to the word 'day' in the Bible, beginning with the first words of Genesis, but the three verses from Exodus put the word into context for the Christian. The Sabbath was special, setting Israel apart from nearby cultures and a day of rest from labour, which was both a gift and a remembrance of God's provision for His people. It also gives us a familiar pattern of life, six days of work followed by one of rest, a seven-day week dating back somewhere between the 6th and 9th centuries BC.

The life of the ordinary people we read about in the Bible may not have been so stressed in terms of timekeeping, but that does not mean that daily struggles to put food on the table, or deal with the consequences of illness were any less a cause for anxiety. Jesus knew that. He was not from a wealthy household and would have been very much aware of needs within the local community. But growing up he knew that this present life, and the day we wake into, is only a part of God's bigger picture - words echoed in the passage from Matthew. Jesus also knew that his time was short, and he needed to make best use of the days he had, to share his own light, as John's Gospel reminds us.

Acts reminds us that the word 'day' also appears in 'The Day of the Lord' as prophesied in Joel 2:28-32 when God's Spirit pours out on all people, rather than specific individuals as in the Old Testament. Peter uses this prophecy in preaching to the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, explaining that Jesus died, as everyone knows, but God has raised him from the dead, and this outpouring of the Spirit is proof of what is happening before their eyes.

Discussion

Q) Why is the Sabbath important (or not) to you and the rhythm of your weekly life?

Q) Should a part of the Sabbath be rest, and how achievable is that?

Q) Is there a link between our valuation of the Sabbath and the fulfilment of Peter's words in Acts?



'Lost - yesterday, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered, for they are gone forever.' (Horace Mann)

'My favorite things in life don't cost any money. It's really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time.' (Steve Jobs)

'To write it, it took three months; to conceive it three minutes; to collect the data in it all my life.' (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Evenings

(Read Psalm 104:19-23, Exodus 27:20-21, Matthew 8:14-17, Matthew 26:20-30)

The Psalmist tells us in his poem that ‘the sun knows when to go down’, and evening in biblical times would be the time when most people would be together as a family.

By more settled New Testament times, in towns and villages that would have meant a house made of stone or mud bricks, a rudimentary fire to keep the family warm at night and the flickering of oil lamps by which to see.

Golden lamps fuelled by olive oil were at the centre of the tabernacle built in the time of Moses, a visual reminder of the presence of God, and the instruction was clear, ‘Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.’ (Exodus 27:21)

The evening for Jesus was, we can imagine, not a time of rest during his time of ministry. Matthew Chapter 8 tells us of a visit to Peter’s house, where his mother-in-law lies ill. Jesus offers healing, and as the sun goes down a steady queue forms outside the door of people seeking healing and release. Jesus meets their needs, tired though he must have been.

The last passage from Matthew has possibly the most poignant connection with evening, as Jesus shares a Passover meal with his disciples before breaking bread and sharing wine for the last time before his betrayal, Peter’s denial and the disciples disappearing

in confusion until after the Crucifixion and Resurrection appearances at the empty tomb. The meal holds great symbolism, and the disciples would gradually understand the historic meaning of the Passover symbols in Jesus’ life and death.

Discussion

Q) Candles are lit in some churches on Sundays and through the week cathedrals encourage visitors to light a small candle as part of their prayer for a loved one. What is it about the flickering light of a candle that helps bring comfort?

Q) Do you find more benefit in a quiet evening, or in the company of others, at home or in a public place? What do you look for from the evening before sleep?

Q) Picture yourself reclining at the table with Jesus, sharing that evening meal... do you think the significance of the moment would be obvious in the sharing of bread and wine?

Further thought & prayer

Before you sleep tonight, thank God for the blessings of this day, and bring to Him in prayer any frustration, sadness or anger still in your heart.