

# Time and transformation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 18 February 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 1B

Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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'People assume', said the tenth Dr Who <sup>1</sup>, 'that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but *actually* from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint - it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly... time-y wimey... stuff.' Isn't that Time Lord right? Time is much more fascinating than we ordinarily think.

Take past, present, and future. What do we understand by them? Each has its issues. Despite those who despise history, the past, for instance, is essential, especially for people of faith, as we respond to both revelation and tradition. If, in this country, we have also not learned by now that truth-telling about our shared past is vital, then we are simply not awake, or serious about justice. There is also much spiritual validity in the assertion that what we need to do is to be aware of the present moment. Yet that affirmation is also potentially superficial and quietistic. Future attention is also urgent, as anyone concerned for succeeding generations is well aware, especially with climate change.

Meanwhile, in today's Gospel reading we are challenged even more deeply. For we are called to choose not only to address what is valuable in past, present and future: in what we call chronological, or measurable, time, deriving from the Greek word '*chronos*'. Rather we are brought face to face with '*kairos*', another Greek word which means the 'right or critical', or meaningful, time. Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς, are the key words in Greek in Mark chapter 1 verse 15: words often translated as '*the time has been fulfilled*' (or 'is ripe' - for, as the verse continues, '*the reign of God has drawn near, (repent) turn around and believe the good news*'...

Kairos: what a powerful concept! In recent decades, it has been central to many liberation struggles. Some of us may thus recall the Kairos Document, issued in 1985 by a group of mainly black South African theologians based predominantly in Soweto. This challenged the Churches' response to the vicious policies of the apartheid regime, providing a prophetic voice for liberation. Similarly, a Kairos Statement was issued by Palestinian Christians in December 2009, naming the occupation of Palestine as a '*sin against God and humanity*', affirming non-violent resistance as a '*right and duty*' of all Palestinians, and calling on the international community to do all it could to stand with Palestinian people to end injustice. Today, the Palestinian Christian movement known as *Kairos Palestine* <sup>2</sup> continues that work, and, if we have not already heard their Kairos word, recent events should surely challenge us to wake up and take stock.

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<sup>1</sup> In the manifestation of David Tennant

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/>

Reconsidering time is also something needed here. Indeed, a key element of the First Nations peoples' challenges involves time. For, among its many devastating effects, invasion of this land shattered Indigenous experiences of time, destroying the past and meaningful futures, and confining First Nations peoples to the repressive walls of an enduring colonial 'present'.

Meanwhile, the modern world does little to help others either: with its obsessions with linear time – time as simply '*one thing after another*', its self-serving ideas of 'progress' created by successful 'élites'; and its reliance on such tools as the clock and continuing centring of speed as a supposed mark of civilisation. Not for nothing have queer theorists also questioned normative concepts of time: asking us, for example, to reconsider how notions of marriage, children, generativity, and inheritance define and confine our cultural expectations of responsibility, happiness, and the future; and, like First Nations and other 'othered' people, offering up other ways to think about history, relationships, notions of success, and the linear segmentation of past/present/future. For, no less than race, sex, and gender, our concepts of time are culturally constructed, bound up with forces of desire and power<sup>3</sup>.

What does this have to do with Mark's Gospel? Well, precisely that Mark's understanding of God's time, and especially *kairos*, also powerfully challenges 'ordinary', 'common sense', ideas of time, and calls us, through Jesus the Christ, into new ways of shaping our lives and the times in which we live. Mark's Gospel thereby follows tradition, for the word *kairos* is indeed used 87 times in the Bible, including in Ecclesiastes, in that notable passage (Ecclesiastes 3.1-8) which speaks of a *kairos*, or 'a right time' for all things. For unlike our obsessions with chronological time, God is not concerned with measuring time, but with meaningful time.

All the Gospels proclaim the 'good news', of the true meaning of life and time. They urge us: do not live your life and miss its meaning. Wake up to God's time, not human clocks! Each Gospel therefore wrestles with divine, meaningful, time in its own helpful ways. Matthew's Gospel thus emphasises how Christ recapitulates, or renews, past meaning and fulfils the faith. Luke outlines the whole of history - Gentile and Hebrew – as a process of salvation. John's Gospel seeks to reveal Christ as the eternal divine presence. Mark's Gospel however expresses this most dramatically.

Each Gospel also highlights divine transformation, our congregation's keynote theme this Lent. Yet, in Mark's Gospel, as we have reflected recently in relation to the demonic, Jesus is pre-eminently a transformative force. For, in Mark's Gospel, we have powerful apocalyptic resonances: where God in Jesus not so much renews, fulfils, or sanctifies time, but breaks into time, challenges and contends with 'ordinary', 'common sense', time, and demands a decision about what human beings choose.

There are no straight lines of time in Mark: we are not asked, as in Matthew, to look back to Moses, or, as in Luke, forward from Jerusalem to Athens and Rome, or to look to eternity with John. Mark's call to transformation is urgent and immediate. Mark's Jesus calls us into *kairos*, divine time and divine action and response. This all helps us make sense of the three parts of our Gospel today: Jesus' baptism, temptations and initial preaching...

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<sup>3</sup> See further: '*Queer Disorientations: Four Turns and a Twist*' by Moore, Brintnall & Marchal, Introduction to (eds) Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, & Mark Larrimore *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (2015) New York University Press

Today's Gospel reading might appear to be three different stories, but they are more like time: in other words, forming one reality with at least three different dimensions. For they are unified by the concept of the *basileia*, the kingdom, the empire, or reign, of God: that reality, in and beyond time, which is the ultimate heart of love and meaning. That term - *basileia*, or kingdom, or reign - is crucial. For the *basileia*, the empire, of God, is diametrically opposed in Mark's Gospel to the *basileia* of Rome, and its colonial lackeys.

Again, grasping the concept of time is a crucial grasp here. For like some modern imperial constructions - including some western political and economic formulations such as secularism, some types of democracy and late capitalism - the Roman Empire purported to be what has been termed '*the end of history*': in other words, the end of meaningful time. '*There is no alternative*', it said, as say all empires, and their acolytes. In God however, declares Mark's Gospel, there is always an alternative, and it starts right here, right now, in this *kairos* moment.

The first story, about baptism, affirms this truth. You may be told, says the Gospel, that there is no alternative to the ways in which our lives, and our times, are constructed. Yet new lives, new kinds of times, are possible, and baptism both expresses, and empowers us, in this. In baptism, like Jesus, we are called to let go of our old selves and false constructions of time and reality, including imperial ways of thinking and acting: the 'normal' ways of living which betray love and meaning, and the planet itself. In this, baptism both grounds us afresh in the depths of liberating tradition and creates new foundations for better lives and better times.

Secondly, the story of Jesus' temptations is not so much an invitation for us, in Lent, to dwell foolishly on minor foibles, such as eating too many chocolates. Rather it is a call to reflect upon, and to let go of, all that denies love, meaning, and God's time. For, symbolically, the temptations embody human struggles with imperial impositions: with the drives for power over others, for possessions, and for fame. These corrupt and weaken our resistance. Our time is then no longer a divine time, sharing in a reign of love, but confinement to chronological time, and the service of the various empires of our day. To break free therefore involves what St. Paul called *kenosis*, a letting go, thus building up our resistances to destruction, through dwelling more deeply on love from out of the wilderness.

Thirdly, out of understanding our true being, in God's time and presence, we can then enter, like Jesus, into active ministries of love: preaching 'good news' by being 'good news', in actions, and, where necessary, in words. This flows out of our baptism and wilderness struggles, our letting go of the powers of empire: or, as the Gospel puts it, out of our *metanoia*, our turning to live in God's time and reign. Such changing of perspectives and orientation is then 'good news' for others, no longer bound by bad energies or demons, but focused on *eudaimonia*, on true happiness and flourishing.

What then does *kairos* mean to each of us, and to us together?

What is erupting in our lives?

What do we struggle with which may be revelatory of God's call and reign?

Of what do we need to repent, that is let go, and what good news might we then receive?

What do today's calls of *kairos* from Palestine, from our First Nations peoples, and from other places in our world mean to us?

How will we respond?

Let me conclude. This morning we are invited after worship to reflect on some possible congregational futures, especially regarding buildings and their use. That is why I have placed that artist' impression of a possible future Sydney Town Hall Square on the front of our liturgy sheet. It is there, like Mark's Gospel, to challenge us to break out of our usual limited expectations, of time as well as place. For it is so easy to hold on to the past, to be limited to present expectations, or to be captivated by future possibilities. But what does God's kairos challenge us to share? This is also timely in relation to Sydney Mardi Gras, whose theme this year is 'Our Future'. For, as the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz put it:

*"Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time: a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough."*<sup>4</sup>

For, in contrast to what he called 'straight time', Muñoz proposed an ecstatic time. This is not time that surrenders to the moment, but, like the *basileia*, the kingdom of God, is a time that calls on the past and projects other futures. In Muñoz 'words: "*Knowing ecstasy is having a sense of timeliness's motion: comprehending temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present).*"

Like Dr Who at the Time Lord's best, that, I believe, is pretty near to what Mark's Jesus is trying to tell us and the kind of time and transformation into which we are invited. In God's grace.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://publicseminar.org/2019/02/the-potential-of-the-queer/>