

Sermon preached at OCC, 31 December 2023

Lord, let our hearts and minds be still so that we may listen for the movement of your Holy Spirit and feel your presence in the fullness of Your time. Amen.

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

In the fullness of God's time

Time flies – the New Year's Day is just a half day away!! How do you feel about it? Did time move so quickly for you, or will it just be another day? Research shows that young children experience time moving more slowly, while life seems to speed up as we age. It is because we gauge time by memorable events, and fewer new things occur as we age to remember, making it seem like childhood lasted longer.¹ If time is measured by memorable events, what is the fullness of time as we read in both readings? In Galatians, Paul says that when the fullness of time came, the Son of God came into being among us, and that's when we became God's family. In Luke, the fullness of time is observed and confirmed by two faithful people waiting for the coming of the Messiah. In short, new things are happening in the fullness of time, and some people either recognize or live by it.

In Galatians 4:4-7, Paul delivers a highly theological statement about the overall meaning of the coming of the Son of God for humanity in summary fashion. He doesn't need the Christmas story or nativity. Instead, he does it by seeing it from new perspectives. That is, the Son's coming becomes the cause of salvation for humankind, especially by entering into time – our time that flows chronologically. It is extraordinary because all things – living or nonliving- are within time. Also, the reason was to be among us, live like us, and die like us but to rise again, which is against time. A timeless world seems strange, but quantum physics begins to reveal the nature of time. According to Italian theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli, there is no such thing as a past or future because time doesn't exist.²

Before Rovelli, Einstein showed that time is relative. For example, if someone is in a spacecraft, their time passes more slowly as the spacecraft moves faster than us on earth. In this relative world, no such an absolute "now" is more or less meaningless. For Rovelli, time is merely a function of our "blurred" human perception. We see the world only through a glass, darkly; we

¹ Janet Choi, *How to Slow Down Time: the Science Behind Stopping Life from Passing you by* (blog.idonethis.com)

² Rovelli, Carlo, *The Order of Time* (2019)

are watching Plato's shadow-play in the cave. According to Rovelli, our undeniable experience of time is inextricably linked to the way heat behaves, which moves in one direction from heat to cold, as demonstrated by the second law of thermodynamics. This is why we can know only the past, not the future. Perhaps Rovelli tries to give us a glimpse of the reality of God, which exists eternally, while our world or our time – our experiences, to be exact- is finite and temporary. The Son's coming into history from the realm of no time changed the course of life. Once slaves by power and finitude became not only free but also heirs of God and God's family. Once, the hopeless became hopeful, filled with light only through God's infinite patience and love by waiting for the right moment to send the Son and the Spirit.

In this God-involved fullness of time, we don't see any human power in the view. Also, the God who will act on it is alone and won't depend on anyone to change the situation. For God, sending this helpless baby together with the Holy Spirit was enough because it enables us to cry 'Abba! Father!' as soon as we encounter this fullness of God's time. As soon as we know that we are members of God's family, we are no longer afraid of the finite worldly power. We read similar points in Luke's gospel.

Here, we see two faithful people waiting for the Messiah to appear in their lifetime. The baby Jesus followed the chronological time as he was presented to the Temple. By that time, Joseph and Mary could register in a Roman census³ while worshipping in the Temple of God. The presentation of the firstborn male child to the Temple originated from Exodus 13:2 in that every firstborn male was designated holy to God. This verse is set in the context of God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Children born into slavery belonged to the slave master. Yet, in consecrating them to God, the Israelites affirmed their new identity as God's people.

While presenting Jesus in the Temple reflects the act of God's saving act in the past, Simeon looks forward to God's deliverance. Simeon awaits a moment when God will console those in exile, either in Babylon or the Roman Empire. When taking the child in his arms, it is when the time is fulfilled as he declares the moment of deliverance is at hand.⁴ But that's not all. Simeon warns Mary and Joseph that the child, as the mark of salvation, will cause the 'falling and rising' of many – Israel and us today. It is not through war, economic overturn or natural disaster but by revealing people's inner thoughts.⁵ History shows how one person's ideas and leadership

³ Luke 2:1-11

⁴ Luke 2:29-32

⁵ Luke 2:34-35

made kingdoms rise or fall. If so, how much more about life in the infinite? Also, when Anna sees the child, her mourning turns to praise, and her lifelong fasting ends as God comes to return God's people from exile.

In the fullness of God's time, we experience the beginning of a new life, which is still coming. Because new things happen daily in this new era, we can't go old but stay young, as no one will go old in God's kingdom. As such, Paul doesn't talk to Galatians only but to us when he says this. "So you [singular] are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."⁶ As the hearers of this proclamation today, we know that the time is fulfilled in our hearing. We are no longer spectators of this drama but critical characters who will improvise the unfinished drama to be completed but in the way of Christ. Amen

⁶ Galatians 4:7