

Genesis 1:14-19 & 49:14-15

I remember watching a television programme a few years ago about George Best, the footballer. One part of the programme stuck in my mind. It consisted of a brief clip of Best weaving his way in and out and around an opponent, all filmed in slow motion. And it was very evident, in the revealing nature of the slow motion, that Best's body movements were beautifully balanced and flowing in contrast to his opponent's which were jerky and haphazard. Best seemed to have all the time in the world while his opponent was all at sea: 'all the time in the world.' The reading from Genesis chapter one detailing the fourth day of creation, is an emphatic declaration that God is the God of time; of seasons and days and years and that his purpose in the gifting of time within and for all his creation is a good thing. We live our lives in the awareness of the linear nature of

our existence. It has a beginning, a developing, a maturing and an end. We witness that fact in miniature every year through the unfolding of the seasons and we experience it for ourselves over a lifetime. And because we are part of time itself we can often feel that we are a slave to it. There are moments when it appears to pass so quickly when we wish it would slow down and there are times, of course, when it seems to drag its feet. How do we make the best of the time that we have, aware that we cannot make assumptions about God's good gift to us of time on his earth to enjoy life, for "as for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more? After the shocking event of humanity's betrayal of God in the Garden of Eden, recorded in Genesis 2, we read of the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at

the time of the evening breeze. Isn't that a wonderful image: God, with all the time in the world at his disposal, moving in his creation to fellowship with his creatures; beautiful, invigorating if it weren't for the fact that his creatures were cowering in the corner, attempting to remove themselves from him; hiding away from his love and care? It strikes me that before the Fall we had all the time in the world; but now it is so different. We move forward to the end of Genesis to our principal reading this morning in chapter 49:14-15.

“Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds; he saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to the burden, and became a slave at forced labour.” This is one of a set of predictive sayings that Jacob offered to his sons. He indicated to them what would happen to his descendants when eventually they would come to

live in the land of their inheritance. And we find within these sayings a mixture of blessings and curses; exactly what we would expect in the context of a fallen creation. These outcomes are not in common with “the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” but they are the outcomes of the eating of the forbidden fruit. We find this mixed scenario in the saying directed to Issachar. You will note that the NIV pew Bible differs from the text I read earlier. The NIV translates “Issachar is a scrawny donkey lying down between two saddlebags”. Most translations describe him as a strong donkey and the saddlebags are often translated as sheepfolds. And these translation differences demonstrate to us that scholarship is far from convinced as to what these ancient Hebrew words actually mean and so we would be foolish to attribute too much significance to one

particular reading over another. But our concern this morning is not with the description of Issachar himself, but with what he would see and how he would respond to what he saw. It records; “he saw that a resting-place was good, and that the land was pleasant”. We are inspired by what we perceive to be good things. We desire what we think is best for us and for our families and friends. And we are eager to go after these things. We will invest time in pursuing them and so where our heart is, there will our energies be invested. We will spend our time seeking our desires. Issachar’s land would be to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee, an extremely fertile allotment that apparently could only produce many good things that would ensure the prosperity of the tribe of Issachar. That’s how it looked from his perspective anyway and so as Genesis records; “he bowed his shoulder to the burden”. What goals and

their projects take up our time? What are the things that motivate us and so are the things that will remain with us daily? Are these goals consistent with a balanced and responsible approach to God's investment in us? We are told in the Genesis' account that Issachar became a slave at forced labour. Here was this wonderful goal which was attractive to his eyes and yet his enjoyment of it was compromised by hard graft; the kind of hard graft that doesn't lead to freedom but to enslavement. This term is entirely negative. It is the same term that is used of the Hebrews in bondage to the Egyptians. How important it is that the goals we have and the investment in time we grant to their achievement are consistent with God's desire for us. For if they are not we will tire and become enslaved....

In considering the Christian giving of time we are to reflect on the way we use our time - all of our time. I

would like you to try and dispel the notion that a stewardship season is all about the church. It's not; it's about you and all of your life. It's about time for God. Why are corporate worship and private devotions essential ingredients for a healthy human life? In what ways does time for God differ from time for the Church; should time for God be regarded as time spent in activity or time when we stop doing; stop being busy? In what ways does time spent with friends and family enrich human life? How important is time for friends and family when we prioritise our use of time? What are the benefits from spending time working? In what ways is the balance of life upset when there is no opportunity to work or when time for work encroaches on time for other things? How does time for rest and recreation differ from time for family and friends? What was Jesus saying when he emphasised the second

great commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”? In what ways do we give time for the work of the Church? Does the Church make the best use of the time we give? In what ways could the Church make better use of our gift of time? Many questions and you’re looking for answers! And you are to find the answers in the time you spend reflecting through these weeks and in the months to come. I would encourage you all to keep a time diary for a week. This will reveal to you how much time is used in eating, sleeping, in working or education. The time that is left is the time when we make choices about what we do and so invites questions like: what choices do we make; does our use of time lead to a balanced life; what different choices could we make? To finish with I would like to return to the illustration I began with of George Best in full flow. The last detail in my memory is his face. As he glided

past his opponent in perfect balance, with apparently all the time in the world on his side, he wore a beaming smile on his face: not, I would like to think, an arrogant, mocking smile, but the smile of a man full of joy in the sublime talent that God had gifted him with. Time well spent in fulfilment of talent to the honour of God is joyful time and we seek nothing short of that for ourselves.