Sermon

‘Now is the time’

Trinity 11 – 27th August, 2017
“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” (Matt. 16.13)

Three statements I’d like you to complete (but not right now)…

‘It is too soon to…’

In other words, what do you long to do or see happen, but it’s not right just now, there aren’t the opportunities, or whatever?

Second statement – ‘It is too late to…’

What opportunity has now passed you by that you wish you had grasped, but it’s too late now?

And the third one – ‘It is the right time to…’

What lies in front of your nose that could be done right now?

What is it too soon for, what is it too late for, and what is it just the right time for – because it’s important to know the difference?

The episode in today’s gospel reading forms a turning point for Jesus and his disciples, and the timing is crucial. If you were to fold Matthew’s gospel in half, literally as well as spiritually, you’d make a crease pretty much right through chapter sixteen. And if you were to plot Jesus’ travels during his ministry on a map, Caesarea Philippi is also a sort of mid-point in that it’s the furthest away from Jerusalem that Jesus went, and so from here, he turns back towards Jerusalem to head for the big show-down. Up till now, it’s been too soon to arrive there, and now it’s too late to do anything he hasn’t already done – now it is time for Jerusalem.

I can’t play tennis to save my life, but I’m told that, when serving, everything up to the point when the racket is behind your head is a matter of style, but from that moment onwards, what you do is crucial to a good serve. That transition point is just about where we’re at in this gospel. Jesus has drawn back, taken his time, done it in a particular style, but now things are about to change – it really is crunch time.

Just as there was a right time for Jesus and his disciples, so there are ‘right moments’ for each of us. For some things now is exactly the right time – and we need to recognise that and respond.

In the New Testament there are two words for time. One is ‘chronos’ (from which we get words like chronology) which is ‘tick-tock’ time (minutes and seconds, days and weeks) and the other is ‘kairos’, as in, ‘seize the day.’ The thing about ‘chronos’ time is that there’s
always more of it. If you let this second pass, another will be along soon enough. But 'kairos' time is different. If you don’t seize this moment, it will be lost for ever.

Jesus didn’t turn towards Jerusalem because it was the right date, he turned because it was the right moment. Too soon and he wouldn’t have prepared his disciples, he would have rushed the serve and the ball could have gone anywhere. Too late and perhaps he would have missed it altogether. Grabbing the moment when it comes is crucial, it’s the crux of the matter, it’s the ‘cross’ or ‘crucifixion’ moment that we mustn’t let pass.

The trouble is, most of us are quite good at delay, arguing with ourselves that the time isn’t quite right, that it’s just a bit too soon. People don’t like change so let’s put it off; we’re not quite sure about this problem, so let’s not do anything for the moment; if we talk about our faith now, we’ll spoil the friendships we have established – but if ‘too soon’ turns into ‘too late’, it means we’ve missed the ‘kairos’ moment in between.

What is it now for me, and for you, that’s sitting in the ‘too soon’ or ‘too late’ pile that we know deep down ought to be in the ‘right now’ pile? What do you know you should have been doing that you’ve worried over but kept putting off – not responding in some way to a niggling feeling that’s been telling you that God has called you. I promise you, you have good news to tell – your church is a lovely place to be, singing is good for the soul, the congregation is full of friendly people, the biscuits are chocolate (and if they’re not, it’s an easy problem to fix). And on top of all that, the message of the gospel is love, hope, peace, salvation, everything – it really is good news for everyone.

I haven’t shared that good news with everybody I have met, and not everybody I have shared it with has come to faith – but I do regret not seizing more of the ‘kairos’ moments when they have come along, and I’ve never been shot, beaten or attacked when I have spoken to people about God or asked that simple question, ‘What about you, who do you say this man is?’

The Diocesan vision is for the church to be a transforming presence in the community – to be a people who live distinctive Christian lives, who serve the community, share our faith and minister in the church together. Now is the right time for all these things. It’s not too soon to encourage faith, it’s not too soon to get involved and offer those around us what we have in terms of love and service, in terms of good news and hope, in terms of friendship and community. And it’s not too late for the funny old Church of England – even if it does drive us all nuts at times.

The crucial question for all the world is, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Up until you answer that question, life is just a question of style. After that question, it’s everything – and it can never be too soon or too late to ask it, or to respond to the knowledge we share with Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.