

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children. May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands.” Psalm 90: 12 - 17

Dear Friends,

The words above are taken from the set Psalm for this Sunday. Psalm 90 is not one that I am particularly familiar with. In my Bible it is described as “*A prayer of Moses the man of God.*” It is a fascinating Psalm because to our modern ears, in parts it presents an image of God which is difficult for us to hear or understand. In earlier verses it describes God as being above, beyond and before all things and talks of how humanity is “*consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation,*” and how “*all our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.*” Our lives are compared to grass which appears in the morning but by the evening has withered away and died. The context for that of course is the eternal nature of God and God’s kingdom.

We perhaps have a different understanding of God today and prefer to focus more on the concept of a loving God than an angry or wrathful God. And certainly, the message of Scripture as a whole is that the overwhelming love of God embraces and transforms all things – God is making all things new!

But I have been captivated this week by the first few words I have quoted: “*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*” I wonder what Moses might have been getting at? I think perhaps part of it is about using our time on this earth wisely, not just frittering it away or allowing it to pass us by, but to make the most of it. I think there is a sense of purpose behind these words. It is not just a case of counting off yet another day on this miserable planet (as you might think if you read the first half of the Psalm!) It is more about assessing our lives as a whole and each individual day within them and offering them to God for God’s purposes. Teach us to number our days might be interpreted as “*take time to mark time.*”

Perhaps it is the same sentiment that lies behind our Acts of Remembrance this week. We remember those who gave their lives for our freedom, we give thanks for their sacrifice but we also seek to learn lessons and live differently. Remembrance should lead to reflection and then action.

I hope and pray it is the sentiment that is being adopted by President-Elect Joe Biden. He seems to be determined to use the time between now and January to listen, to reflect, to learn lessons and to plan. For many of us this is a long-hoped for change in dynamic from what we are used to.

But what about us? What might it mean for us? I am currently reading a short, insightful book by Archbishop Stephen Cottrell, titled, *“Hit the ground kneeling – seeing leadership differently.”* In it he reflects upon some of the narratives that our world often lives by in relation to leadership. And the first such narrative he tackles is the one that says, *“hit the ground running!”*

I'm sure we all know what he means by that – the sense that the busier we are the more productive we think we will be, the bigger impact we think we will have! Archbishop Stephen suggests that the Christian Gospel challenges that narrative, hence the title of his book, *“Hit the ground...kneeling.”*

The first task of the Christian leader, indeed of each Christian in every aspect of life where they express influence, is to take time and make space. Indeed, he puts it more bluntly than that by saying: *“The first mark of leadership that we can discern from the Christian perspective is this: find time to stop. The leader is sometimes the person who dares to do nothing.”*

Many of us lead such busy lives that we do not have the time to *“number our days,”* to be still, to reflect, to contemplate, to remember, to gaze on the beauty, glory and majesty of God. We do not take time to weigh up options carefully and prayerfully, seek consensus, build coalitions, map out the ground. Instead we *“rush in where angels fear to tread.”* And as such we miss out on gaining the heart of wisdom that such contemplation can develop.

Archbishop Stephen writes: *“The lifestyle guru Stephen Covey tells the instructive story of two men sawing wood. One person works solidly through the day. The other takes a break for ten minutes every hour. At the end of the day the person who has taken the breaks has cut considerably more wood. ‘How can this be?’ asks the other man. ‘Every time I took a break,’ comes the reply, ‘I sharpened my saw.’”*

Our current restrictions present before us the temptation to get busier working in new and challenging ways that can eventually leave us feeling exhausted, burned-out even, maybe a little blunt and ineffective. But these restrictions also provide us with, dare I say, a God-given opportunity, to work and live differently. To offer a model to the wider world, that wisdom and effectiveness follow from taking time to be still, to pray, to reflect, to contemplate, to plan well, to respond with care and compassion, to live in such a way that we are indeed learning *“to number our days, that we might gain a heart of wisdom.”*

May the favour of the Lord our God indeed rest upon us and establish the work of our hands.

Every Blessing,

Rev Tim

