

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Patience

Presented by Michael Jensen

I

Could there be any less sexy virtue than patience? “Patience” always reminds me of waiting for a bus that never comes, of putting off what you want to have NOW. Patience was what my mother told me to have when I was bored. We live in an age of impatience.

There seems to be less and less time these days. Time is something we now manage, or share, or flex. (But hopefully not *do*). It is more important to save time than to spend it, and loathsome to waste it. It is painful to have to *kill* time. Time is money. Because of time’s rarity, we are forced to offer each other of *quality* time because we have no *quantity* of it left to give.

We live in the great age of the time-saving device: the microwave, the word processor, the elevator, the dishwasher, the vacuum cleaner, the automobile, the long-haul passenger aircraft, 256Mb of RAM. Instant coffee. Fast food. And yet the microwave, for example, saves us just four minutes a day. Many supposed time-savers come with their own time-traps: the airport delay, the baffling computer malfunction, or eternal traffic. We sleep less, work longer, commute further. Where did all the time go?

II

In the 60s, drugs were for escape, for slowing time down. In the nineties and the noughties, the drug of choice is caffeine, the ultimate stimulant. We chase hyper-awareness rather than hallucination. Only our society could have a drug called “speed”. The latest fad is the high energy high price vitamin drink, designed to explode you out of that snoozy period after lunch and take control of what is left of your day. Go fast - all the time. We are chronically impatient.

Why do we have “time” in the first place? Human beings are obsessive measurers of time, counting its units and sub-units, building more and more accurate clocks, and strapping time-measuring devices to our bodies. We are time-bound because we are mortal. You can only measure something that has a limit to it after all. The bell tolls, the second hand ticks, the digits change - they all remind us that one day our time will be up. Our own bodies, with their timetables of growth and decay, are clock-like (if not clockwork), counting off the few years that remain. On the other hand, for God, a millennium and a day are said to be the same. It was utterly ironic for Sydney to write *Eternity* on its bridge on 31 December 1999. Nothing could have been less eternal than that moment.

We are impatient with machines. We are impatient with incompetence and inexperience of others. We are quick to respond with anger and condemnation, to honk the horn, to kick something in frustration, to “flame” the person (a word for writing an angry email). We are too impatient to forgive. We lack endurance when things don’t go our way.

It is just as well that God is different. It is just as well that God is a patient God.

One of God’s most revolutionary and amazing qualities, the Bible tells us, is His **patience**.

In Israel they had a saying among the sayings they used to learn that told of what God's character was like. It is found in Exodus 34:6-7:

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

What is God like? He is **slow to anger**. Now that doesn't mean he is just too laid back to get mad, or that he doesn't have reason to BE angry, or that he doesn't get angry or that he lacks justice. It's just that he is **PATIENT**. He allows time for human beings to come to their senses, repent and turn to him. He doesn't rush to condemn, even when it is justified, in the hope that men and women will change. Such is his love, that he doesn't close the door on us even when we are his enemies. Even when he does deliver punishment, he allows people a chance to make good.

III

The story of **Jonah** teaches us a lot about the patience of God. God commands Jonah to go and tell to the Ninevites that he is going to put on a fireworks display in their town as a result their awfulness. Jonah of course headed the other way. But God is patient with Jonah and brings him back into line with a storm and then a fish. Finally, Jonah fronts up to Nineveh - and then is disgusted and affronted when the Ninevites repent and God shows - patience! Jonah then reveals why he was so impatient in the first place: he says “I knew you were a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, full of love and faithfulness”. Jonah totally loses patience with God's predictable patience.

Jesus also told of God's patience. The parable of the lost son is my favourite example. The Father in that story, who waits and waits for his Son to return from spending his money on wine, women and song - he is like God in his patience. A great image - that Father, with every right to be angry, with every right to give up his son for lost, instead waits in patience for his return.

And God showed his patience in Jesus himself. By providing us with a Saviour, he gave us an opportunity to escape the consequences of our sin. He has in Jesus' death on the cross given us a way out: and plenty of time to find it.

But Christians have often been a bit frustrated with this patience of God. It doesn't seem fair that we are strung out waiting for Jesus to return for 2000 years. Why the delay? The early Christians were the same - while God was hanging off, they were experiencing suffering and hardship: why didn't he hurry on up?

But the Bible does explain why there is a delay, in 2 Peter 3:8-10:

“But do not forget this one thing dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousands years, and thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...”

God has got time. He could end it all today. He could have ended it all years ago - but he is not like that. He has delayed the time of Jesus' return so that everyone has an opportunity to repent and escape judgment. God always takes the long view.

IV

Christian patience comes because of taking God's view of things. A Christian can be patient because of eternity. We know that God delivers on his promises - that our rescue is sure. And so there is good reason for us to be patient in the present, because of our great hope.

Christian patience involves two ideas: endurance and forbearance.

Endurance is an idea we easily understand. I saw this week that the RTA is thinking about removing the blue line that the marathoners used at the Olympics - and someone was complaining - their mother from the country found it very useful when driving in Sydney (never mind that sometimes she was driving on the wrong side of the road!!).

Being Christian is all about following the blue line - it is an endurance race, not a sprint. The Christian life is about enduring through to the end - enduring through all the ups and downs of life - in health and sickness, in wealth and poverty, in loneliness and in happiness, in persecution and trials and all the rest.

Take a look at the passage from James 5:7ff.

“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”

Farmers don’t get immediate results. They plant and wait. Yet they don’t give up on the plants if they don’t see results straightaway - they hang in there, and it really pays off.

That’s what we should be like.

Another type of Patience can be ours, too. It is **Forbearance**. That is, we like God, can be patient with the mistakes and sins of other people - we can be patient with one another. That’s what we promise when we ask “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” In Ephesians 4 Paul tells Christians to be “patient, bearing with one another in love”. That is, the patient person puts up with a lot and, like God, is slow to anger and quick to forgive.

5. The waiting game...

Christianity is a waiting game, and it calls for patience.

We live in a broken and sinful world where there is all kinds of frustration and sadness. There is sickness, anxiety, loneliness and imperfection everywhere. And I know, some of that has affected people here tonight in ways more painful than I can tell. There is plenty of reason to despair, isn’t there?

We need patience to keep to God’s point of view. Remember to be patient. - There will be an end to the suffering. One day we will actually see the kingdom we are part of now by faith. We can be patient, because of course, God has been so amazingly patient with us.

But it’s not the just endurance side: are you a forbearing and tolerant person? Paul asks us to be patient with one another in church. Hey, I know some people can be annoying, but are you as forgiving as Christ would be? Are you as patient as he was, with all the weird and whacky people God seems to stick together in church?

I know that I need to do some serious work in this area. I am classically impatient. I push lift buttons several times. I want instant gratification. I do not forgive dagginess or incompetence easily - with the exception of my own. I am tempted to chuck in Christ because all the rewards seem a long way off. If you are like me, we need to pray for patience.