

Boy Bishop sermon

Here's a bit of trivia for you. I've been alive for roughly four hundred sixty-two million five hundred eighty-five thousand six hundred seconds. I'm getting on a bit, aren't I? The surprising part of that is that I spent one hundred ninety-nine million seven hundred twenty-eight thousand of those seconds in the Cathedral Choir. That is roughly half of my life. I sung in two oratorios, eight passions, approximately 180 Eucharists and about a thousand evensongs.

I think that time can play tricks on people. For example; when I was in the choir, I couldn't remember time before the choir; In other words, it seemed that my entire life had been spent in the choir; it felt like a long time. Now that I am no longer a chorister I realise that it really wasn't that long, well not that long compared to the 14 billion years for which our universe has existed.

There are other ways in which time can play tricks on us. Time is like a spring. In other words, it seems to lengthen when we are bored, tired or nervous. It contracts when we are enjoying what we are doing. In the choir I particularly loved singing in the Bach

passions and oratorio, the two tours that I went on were enormous fun (the first time that I ever went abroad was with the choir to South Africa) and I loved the carol services. Those times seemed to go by really quickly; in fact, the tour to America must have gone very swiftly, because I only used one pair of socks.

On the other hand, for some things, time really seemed to drag. I confess, I found late Friday evening rehearsals and Sunday matins slightly less enjoyable than the tours. From September, Doctor who is on the television just after Saturday evensong, so I often found myself counting down the seconds wondering whether I would get home in time to curl up on the sofa with Dusty our cat and watch 'Doctor Who'.

Even though I was in the choir for half of my life, it is quite a short time as a treble chorister comparatively to the age of the universe. I wonder if the appeal of the treble chorister voice is not just the purity of the sound, not just because people think choristers look cute and innocent holding a candle at 9 lessons and carols (by the way most of us are NOT cute and innocent), but because of the poignancy and the fragility of the sound and that it passes so quickly, and it reminds people of how time passes and of their

own mortality. It is like a flickering candle, shortly to be extinguished.

Despite how short the span of a single chorister is the life of a choir is far longer. But despite the changes in choristers, lay-clerks, organists, precentors, deans and bishops, boy bishops, the choir will still remain the same in many ways. It is like a tree in that regard, it will lose leaves every year but still keep on going, it is the same tree.

I find it slightly mind-boggling to look up there in the choir stalls, where once I stood, singing William Byrd's 'Sing joyfully' slightly less than joyfully (because it's Byrd again). If I could borrow a time-machine (preferably a TARDIS) and go back maybe three, four hundred years there would still be a cathedral choir singing pretty much the same music. That just shows that centuries can pass, but some things will remain unchanged.

There is a cycle to all things. All creatures have different lengths of life cycles, so for example, butterflies have much, much shorter life spans than tortoises. As Ecclesiastes says 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens'.

So does this mean that we should count years differently for them? Some people do. It is said in one “human” year there are seven “cat” years. But how can we call a year, a year, if a year’s length varies from planet to planet. On Jupiter, for example I would only be one and a half years old, while on Mercury, I would be about to celebrate my sixty second birthday.

Our perception of time is relative to where we stand. A good example of this would be travelling to a different country. Take America (just because the choir have just come back from a tour there, and it has been in the news a lot lately). I went on the trip to Washington three years ago; so let’s choose the time zone there. Their time zone is five hours behind ours, but this doesn’t mean that we are literally ahead of them; merely our viewpoint of our clock’s time of day is ahead of them. After all, the time on a clock is only based on a human idea of what a rotation of our planet should split up into, and displayed on a piece of man-made machinery. The UK is a small country, so the time zone is the same all the way from Land’s End to John O’Groats. But of course there are two exceptions to this rule, both of which are in Hereford. One of course is Mr Bowen himself, who likes the choristers to arrive 5

minutes early, so his time zone is five minutes AHEAD of everyone else. This is a time zone that he attempts to keep the rest of the choir in. Unfortunately for him, the second is the choristers, whose time zone, seems to be five minutes BEHIND everyone else.

With the music itself though, it's not so much time, but TIMING that is important. Well with the choir, turning up on time is important, but when singing, the rhythm is all about time and timing. Hitting the right note at the right time, and holding it for an exact amount of time, often with other people, is pretty much all that music is.

I recently had the good fortune to see Peter Shaffer's play Amadeus, at the National Theatre, with Salieri being played by the amazing Lucian Msamati, who, by the way has been in many famous TV shows, including Doctor Who. I quote Salieri: 'a note of music is either right or wrong absolutely! Not even time can alter that: Music is God's art'.

These days time is very strict and regulated. In our modern world precise digital clocks, timetables and calendars dominate us. It has not always been so. In The Bible, times that sound utterly specific

really are not at all. I suppose that the obvious place to start is with the birth of Jesus. It is highly unlikely that Jesus was actually born on the 25th of December in the year 0 AD. We do not know the actual date of Christ's birth, so for many years people tried to choose dates in the church's calendar to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Pope Clement picked November 18. Hippolytus of Rome calculated Christ must have been born on a Wednesday. An anonymous document believed to have been written in North Africa around A.D. 243, placed Jesus's birth on March 28.

Other examples of how time is represented in The Bible are Noah's Ark, and Jesus' time in the wilderness. The bible specifies 40 days and 40 nights. Now, it is possible that the ark was afloat for 40 days and 40 nights, but the bible often says 40 days and nights when it just means quite a long time.

The final thing I have to say is a quotation that I hope may help to explain the complexities of time and sum up my sermon. By now you may have realised that I quite like Doctor Who, so of course this quotation is from an episode of Doctor Who called Blink. 'People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint - it's

more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly... time-y wimey stuff.' As I said before, and Ecclesiastes said before me, there is a time and season for all things. And with that final thought it is time for me to finish this sermon.

{look at watch}

____ minutes and ____ seconds. Perfect timing