

I confess that I am starting this evening's message in rather an odd place. I don't know if many of you are familiar with Charles Dicken's novel 'A Christmas Carol' and in particular with the section towards the end of the story where the now reformed character Ebenezer Scrooge scrambled out of bed, repeating the words – 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future'. But that is where I start this evening.

It is the first time I have ever started a Bible address with a quote from Charles Dickens – and I guess a reference to a book about Christmas on Independence Day may strike you as somewhat odd. But then I believe that Scrooge's words - 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future' carry a very serious message for every Christian – at all times of the year – and probably at none better than at a Conference Retreat such as we are enjoying this week. If you will excuse a personal reference, for my own part they have particular significance in that, when I leave Lookout Mountain on Friday I shall be retiring officially from my employment with the Government of Wales – having spent some 37 years in Government service. For me especially this conference is an important time for taking stock of my Christian life – and taking a good look at my past, present and future. But I believe strongly that the words 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future' will make as good a resolution for *everyone* one of us as they did for Dickens' fictional character. And it is for this reason that I have decided to consider these words – not only in my session today – but in my next two sessions – tomorrow and Wednesday.

In one sense, of course, we can only live in the present - we cannot actually live in either the past or the future. But what we can do is to live our lives in the present with our eyes very much on both the past and the future – to live now in the light both of what has been and of what is yet to come.

The writer to the Hebrews said of the Lord Jesus that He is the Same, yesterday, today and forever, Heb. 13.8. In contrast, we are very fickle folk – ever changing – but we too have a 'yesterday, a today and a forever' – a past, a present and a future. You may recall how Paul paid tribute to the missionary zeal of the church of the Thessalonians, saying that, far from him having to inform others about the success of his work at Thessalonica, wherever he went others were telling him how effective the believers there had been in spreading the gospel – and how they had turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to await His Son from heaven, 1 Thess. 1.9-10. Yes, they had a past, a present and a future too. And so do we.

I am going to focus this evening on living in the present, tomorrow morning on living in the light of the past and on Wednesday evening on living in the light of the future. Wow, you say – not only does this Welsh man begin by talking about a Christmas story in July, but he follows a mighty odd order for his messages. But, in point of fact, it isn't that strange. I can point to at least three New Testament writers who, on occasions, followed that very order. Take the writer to the Hebrews. Many of you have no doubt noticed that he speaks about three appearances of the Lord Jesus at the end of chapter nine of his epistle – but in what order, pray? Proceeding through verses 24, 26 and 28, we read of the One who has entered into heaven itself, *now to appear* in the presence of God for us – of the One who *appeared once for all* to put away (to annul, abolish) sin by the sacrifice of Himself – and of the One who *will appear a second time*, not concerned with sin at all, to bring our salvation to its consummation. That is, present, past and future.

Yesterday morning we met to break bread. As you know, Paul wrote about the Lord's Supper in the second half of 1 Corinthians 11. In verse 26 of that chapter, the apostle focuses our minds first on the *present* 'as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you show forth (declare, proclaim)', then on the *past*, 'the Lord's death', and finally on the *future*, 'until He comes'. That is, our present practice of breaking of bread forges the connecting link between the Lord's two comings for us. On the one hand, it points back to the greatest *accomplished* event of the *past* – and on the other it points us forward to – what is for us – the greatest *expected* event of the *future*. To varying degrees therefore the breaking of bread also therefore directs our minds, following Paul's order to the present, the past and the future.

I note also that, in the book of the Revelation, John speaks twice in the first chapter of 'Him who *is* and who *was* and who *is to come*', vv.4, 8.

So, able to plead the precedent of at least three prominent New Testament authors, I guess I can claim I am in good company in adopting the order I am.

'I will live in the present', then. Not, I hasten to point out, *for* the present – as one of Paul's fellow-labourers sadly came to do - 'Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world ('the now age'), and has departed for Thessalonica', 2 Tim. 4.10 – no! – not *for* the present but *in* the present.

Paul's *clarion call*, sounded in both his two letters to churches in Asia – to the saints at Ephesus and at Colosse – was 'redeeming the time', Eph. 5.16, Col. 4.5 – 'making the most', that is, 'of every opportunity'. The word translated 'redeeming' isn't the word normally used to describe redemption. This is a commercial term meaning 'to buy out, to purchase completely' and comes from the background of the market place. Paul's word picture is clear – as prudent merchants, tirelessly buying up – snapping up, if you like – and using for yourselves – all available opportunities of doing good and of serving God.<sup>1</sup>

There have been occasions through the ages when an exceptional man or woman has stood out from all others because they faced some momentous opportunity – and seized it – the effects of which proved to be far-reaching and dramatic to say the least. But few – if any – opportunities have ever ranked with that taken by a Queen of Persia about 2,500 years ago. The Queen's own people – the nation of Israel – lay under sentence of death – and that by decree – by *decree* note – of the then most powerful potentate on earth – Xerxes, the mighty King of Persia – known to us as Ahasuerus – whose laws and *decrees* couldn't be reversed or rescinded – prompted by his most senior government official – one Haman the Agagite. Counselling by her cousin, Mordecai, to make supplication to the King for her people, Esther pointed out that it was public knowledge that neither man nor woman was permitted to enter the king's inner court uninvited – on pain of death – unless the King saw fit to extend his golden sceptre. Flavius Josephus claimed that men were stationed around the royal throne armed with axes to despatch any intruders.<sup>2</sup> Esther further pointed out that there was no guarantee whatever she would find favour with the King – in that she had not been summoned by the King for 30 days. This in itself was ground for considerable misgiving. Secular historians describe Xerxes as a vain and sensual monarch – and it was by no means impossible that during the last month he had transferred his affections elsewhere. There were no guarantees in this business – as ex-Queen Vashti could tell you.

Mordecai's reply was simple and to the point – he was confident that, if Esther held her peace, God would doubtless raise up deliverance for the Jews 'from another place' but, as he said, 'who knows whether *you* are come to the kingdom ('have arrived at' the kingdom) for such a time as this'. Returning Mordecai the message, 'I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law. And if I perish, I perish' – Esther took the opportunity which her role as Queen gave her – and went in. The former Queen Vashti had suffered the loss of her crown for not coming when she had been called; Queen Esther was prepared to risk the loss of her head by coming when she had not been called! Neither she nor Mordecai reasoned that because God is in control, they could afford to sit back and fold their arms. They knew that God is pleased to use human instruments to work His will through – and expects those instruments to take what opportunities present themselves. And so, in one sense, aided by a King's sleepless night – the opportunity grasped by Esther saved the day – and the entire Jewish nation. 'Come the hour, come the man', they say – well in this case – 'Come the hour, come the woman'!

But few indeed ever face such dramatic opportunities as that. For most of us, our opportunities are of the far more ordinary, mundane and everyday kind. Of the sort which Paul had in mind when he exhorted the Galatians, 'Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore *opportunity*, let us do good (literally, 'let us work good') to all, especially to them who are of the household of faith', 6.9-10. 'As we have opportunity, let us work good' – it was an excellent saying of Francis of Assisi, 'Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words'.

Such opportunities may not vie with that which Esther seized – but they are nevertheless extremely important – and we can rest assured God takes note of what we do with every one of them.

I said just now that the word 'redeeming' – used in connection with our opportunities of doing good and of serving God – comes from the background of the market-place – and that, in a way, connects with my reading from Luke 19 which is also largely set against a commercial background. In part, I chose this particular parable because it is concerned, not only with the future – with the time, that is, of the kingdom's actual establishment – but with *the present* and with the opportunities which that affords us.

As I am sure you know, there are two distinct aspects to the Kingdom of God in the gospels – the present and the future – the 'now' and the 'not yet'. The future form of the kingdom – its appearing and manifestation in power – will be established when the Son of man sits on the throne of His glory and takes the reins of universal government.

When Jesus spoke the parable, He was making His way to Jerusalem – the city of the great King – and it was commonly believed – by both the crowds and the disciples – that He was going there to establish that glorious kingdom. But *He* knew that He was going to Jerusalem to die – and thence to heaven to receive His kingdom which would not to be established on earth for some time to come.

The Lord had recently told Zaccheus, in verse 9, that salvation had come to his house that very day, but He knew that salvation would not come to the house of Israel until much later.

According to verse 11, one of the reasons Jesus told the parable was to correct the popular misunderstanding. And there can be no doubt that He employed a well-known historical incident as the backcloth and framework for His story. He and His disciples had recently left Jericho, v.1, and were now approaching Jerusalem, v.11 – a distance of less than 20 miles.

Herod the Great had died a little over 30 years earlier. And Archelaus – one of the more fortunate of Herod's sons – more fortunate in that he managed to outlive his father – unlike another three of Herod's sons who - along with many others of his family - were murdered by their insanely jealous father – this Archelaus<sup>3</sup> was cited in Herod's final will as ruler of Judea and Samaria – and so Archelaus left *Jericho* to go to Rome (the 'far country' of v.12) to 'receive his kingdom' as he hoped - to push his claim and have his father's will confirmed by Augustus Caesar.

But Archelaus was detested by the Jews, having, in an uprising following his father's death, slain 3,000 of their number. It was hardly surprising therefore that the Jews dispatched a delegation of 50 men to Rome – where they were joined by a further 8,000 Jews – to plead for freedom from his reign - preferring even to come under direct Roman rule<sup>4</sup>.

No doubt our Lord's story came particularly alive to His disciples because they would have recently passed at Jericho the magnificent palace built there by Archelaus.<sup>5</sup>

The nobleman in the parable chose to commit a relatively small sum to each of 10 of his servants that he might test their industry and faithfulness during his absence - with a view to later allocating to them jurisdiction over the cities in his kingdom.<sup>6</sup> I say 'relatively small sum' partly because the pound is described as 'very little' in verse 17, and partly because there were no less than 60 pounds (or 'mina's) in a single talent – which sum would feature in a later – and in some respects similar – parable of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 25.<sup>7</sup>

The nobleman gave clear and precise instructions that each servant was to 'occupy till I come' – 'to do business, to trade', that is, 'until I come'.

The Lord tells how, come the nobleman's return, he dealt as might be expected with those who had rejected his rule over them – but the parable centres rather in how he determined the roles and positions of responsibility of his servants in his kingdom – solely on the basis of the degree of industry and faithfulness which they showed during his absence – the time of probation, if you like, which had now come to an end.

The first servant to offer an account of his service could point to a remarkable 1000% profit. Impressive – yes – but *his reward* – authority over 10 *cities* – was even more staggering – out of all proportion even to what he had achieved with the pound entrusted to him. A second servant had achieved half as much and was rewarded accordingly.

But another servant had hidden his pound for the duration of his master's absence – ostensibly out of fear of his master, who he claimed was notoriously hard on his servants. By declaring his decision not to take risks with his master's property, he was virtually making his own laziness into a virtue – attempting to shift the blame for his lack of action onto his master.

No – it is true – he had not wasted his master's goods as had the unjust steward, 16.1 – no, he had not spend his portion in riotous living as had the prodigal, 15.13 – no, he had not run up a fantastic debt of 10,000 talents as had the unforgiving servant, Matt. 18.24. Yet he is properly described as 'wicked', v. 22 – for the simple reason that he had not done as he had been told! He had not been left to decide for himself what he would do with his master's pound. He had not been at liberty to put it away in some napkin – whether that be an headdress or a sweatcloth.

But the nobleman was too shrewd for him and quickly saw through his feeble excuse – the truth was that the servant wasn't fearful but lazy, not prudent and cautious but bone idle.

Beyond doubt, by far the most intriguing feature of the parable lies in its emphasis on what happens to the pounds at the end –after they had fulfilled their obvious purpose of establishing how many cities in the kingdom should be allocated to whom – and in particular the parable's focus on the *transfer* of one of the original pounds from one servant to another – followed by the tantalising words which Jesus put into the mouth of the nobleman, 'from him that has not, even *that which he has* shall be taken away from him'. How, we may well wonder, can you take away from someone that which he does not have?

Most certainly then there are some decidedly odd features about the Lord's story – which have nothing to do either with correcting the people's false expectation about the timing of the kingdom or with any of the historical background of Archelaus' journey to Rome – which incident provides no counterpart whatsoever to the role played by the pounds.

And then there is the ludicrous comment which the Saviour put into the mouths of those standing by – 'Lord (addressing the nobleman), he has ten pounds!' If we had been the bystanders in the story, I guess we *might* have interjected, 'Lord, he has 10 *cities*!' – but certainly not, 'he has ten *pounds*'. For who, in his right mind, having received jurisdiction over 10 cities would care a hoot about having a pound to add to the few pounds he already held? But that is precisely the point. From the disciples' point of view – and ours this evening – the parable is largely about that pound!

How then are we to understand the paradox of verse 26 – 'from him that has not, even *that which he has* shall be taken away from him'? The clue lies in the arithmetic of verses 24 and 25. The servant who received 10 cities is described both by the nobleman and the bystanders as 'having' 10 pounds – and yet in fact he had eleven! For he clearly still retained the original pound given to him in verse 13, to which, according to verse 16, he had added a further ten pounds – because to have had the original pound taken from him would have been a punishment – as it proved to be for the wicked servant.

We conclude therefore that verses 24 and 25 should be paraphrased, 'take from him the pound and give it to him who has gained the ten pounds', and, 'Lord, he has gained ten pounds'. Armed with this key, the paradox of verse is easily explained – 'to everyone who has gained shall be given; and from him who has not gained, even that which he has shall be taken away from him'. In other words, the nobleman is simply pointing out that, if a trader or merchant entrusted with capital shows a significant profit, people will eagerly offer him further capital – but a trader who reports no profit will have taken from him the capital previously entrusted to him – 'from him that has not gained – has not made any profit - will be withdrawn even that capital which he was given'.

But why, we are compelled to ask, such concern over a mere pound? What can the pound possibly represent that is so fundamentally important? Well, clearly the pound represents something which every servant of Jesus is given to use and invest – something which can be removed and transferred to others. As I understand it, at its simplest, the pound stands for the opportunities, and openings for service and doing good, which we are all given. Although *the details* of our opportunities differ enormously, we each have in common a week of seven days and a day of 24 hours. And to that extent we are all given the same amount of 'the present' – packed – bulging – with opportunities unique to ourselves.

In other words, my Lord wants me to know that, through the proper and diligent use of my present opportunities and occasions for service in this life and world, I can secure for myself a reward which will consist in part of further, increased and enlarged opportunities and capacity for service in His kingdom. That reward for God-given opportunities grasped and taken now will be opportunities – on a grander, a vaster and a more glorious scale than I can ever dream or imagine – then.

Ah yes – but – alas for Malcolm – there is more to it.

The servant who had his *pound taken from him* stands in the parable for *anyone* who does nothing of eternal value with the opportunities which God gives him. And by introducing this character into His story the Saviour is therefore telling me that my failure to exploit and use my God-given opportunities in this present life and world will lead inescapably to the loss of those opportunities of service which otherwise God would have readily given me to use for Him in His kingdom. And that is no laughing matter!

As I said earlier, from the disciples' point of view – and ours this evening – the parable is largely about the pound which was transferred from one servant to another – that is, it is about the *use* or the *neglect* of my opportunities! And, as I understand it, according to Jesus, by my misuse – my non-use – of opportunities while 'I live in the present', I can forfeit what otherwise would have been mine in His kingdom.

In that day, the Lord is saying, He will determine the place I will fill, the role I will occupy, the scope for service I will be given in His kingdom - *not* on any arbitrary basis - but on the basis of what I have done here with what I have been given. That now is the time when – like it or not – I establish my place in His kingdom. That my future role is now being hammered out on the anvil of the 'present' life.

For, make no mistake, His kingdom will be no place of idleness and ease. It won't be some form of glorified holiday camp. At the beginning, God made man to work. And, as I understand it, the rewards to be secured in the day of review will consist not only of crowns, cities and commendation – but also in a wider sphere of activity – and in increased, enlarged opportunities of serving Him. Well - *do* I want to be the most I can be for Him in His kingdom? Then, the Lord says to me, take care how you live in the present – for it is your energetic use of the opportunities I give you now which prepare and fit you for greater things in my kingdom – but if you don't make use of your opportunities *now*, you will not be given them *then* – use them *here* or lose them *there*!

So now you know why I said earlier that – though the opportunities we each face every day may not vie with that which confronted Esther – they are nevertheless extremely important – and that we can rest assured that God takes note of what we do with them. The Lord Jesus warned the church at Philadelphia to 'hold fast what you have, that *no man take your crown*', Rev. 3.11. Let us leave this session today with the determination to so live 'in the present' that no-one is going to *take our pound* in that day!

I shall ask the apostle Paul to close our session for us this evening :

'As we have therefore opportunity, let us work good to all, especially to them who are of the household of faith' ... 'Not slothful (not flagging) in zeal, fervent (burning, aglow) in spirit, serving (as bondslaves) the Lord', Rom. 12.11 Greek.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Eph. 5. 16 ... 'See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil'. Reason = The days are evil (*ponerai*, "wicked") in a moral sense. Every day and every hour provide opportunities, and we should seize them for these purposes. This is important because we live in days that evil influences and evil individuals dominate.

Col. 4.5 ... 'Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man'. I.e. "be wise in the way you act toward outsiders" show practical Christian wisdom in dealing non-Christians so as to avoid needlessly antagonizing or alienating your pagan neighbors. Imply believers should conduct themselves so that the way they live will attract, impress, and convict non-Christians and give the pagan community a favorable impression of the gospel.

"Grace" used in sense of "pleasantness," "attractiveness," "charm," "winsomeness."

"Seasoned with salt" marked by purity and wholesomeness. that which gives taste or flavor - wholesomeness, since salt was a preservative that retarded corruption in food (cf. Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Eph. 4:29).

<sup>2</sup> Jos. Ant. XI, VI, 3 – together with Whiston's footnote.

<sup>3</sup> 'Augustus, the Roman Emperor, had said, bitterly, that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. (The saying is even more epigrammatic in Greek, for in Greek *hus* is the word for a pig, and *huios* is the word for a son', William Barclay, Daily Study Bible: Matthew, Matthew 2. 3-9. See too the article 'Herod' in ISBE. Although an Idumean by birth (Josephus, Ant. 14:1, section 3), Herod lived as a Jew, avoiding eating pork.

<sup>4</sup> Jos. Ant. XVII, XI, 1; Wars II, VI, 1.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of Archelaus, there was good reason for the Jews' hatred – but we know that, in the case of Jesus, they "hated Him without a cause", John 15.23–25. And I suppose that the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), the beheading of James (Acts 12), and the persecution of the other apostles and of the early church were in effect the embassy which they sent after the Lord Jesus, making it clear that they would not have Him as their King.

<sup>6</sup> The Lord spoke only of 10 servants - but not that the nobleman had only ten servants. A claimant to a throne would have many more – we must translate '10 of his servants'. That is, the man chose 10 for testing – but God gives opportunities to all.

<sup>7</sup> I guess that such small amounts would have meant that the servants faced not only a time of great activity in their lord's absence, but a time of obscure, humble activity – operating not as top-notch merchants, with vast stocks to deal in or invest, but as poor small-time traders, who would need to expend considerable energy to make any profit out of what they have been given.