

Reflection for December

According to the normal order of these reflections, we ought this month to be thinking about the Stations of the Cross, our first activity together on the second day of our pilgrimage. That will however have to wait until next month, because Advent Sunday is the beginning of the Christian year, and therefore an opportunity for us to think about what the passing of time (years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and even seconds) means for our lives of faith.

Some people and cultures see time as cyclical, an endless repetition of experiences and even lives. This fits in well with ideas of reincarnation and salvation is thought of as being delivered from this interminable (i.e otherwise unending) cycle of birth and rebirth.

Others see time rather as a straight line from beginning (ultimately creation) to end (whether our individual deaths or the final dissolution of the world. When this pattern is combined with belief in a creator who is also lawgiver and judge, salvation comes to be seen as deliverance from death and sin.

As Christians, we generally opt for the second of these alternatives. Every passing moment should therefore be an opportunity to move forwards, to grow in maturity, to become "better". Our experience doesn't always reflect this picture, however. To give a very crude illustration, our first human moments, when we are conceived, are full of all sorts of possibilities; all being well we do develop and grow healthy in mind, body and spirit - although even that cannot be guaranteed. That might suggest a linear progression from conception to death. But all too often illness, accident war, or the simple fact of aging challenge that simple view.

Christian faith reflects this more complicated view of time. Although it does not accept the idea of time as an everlasting cycle of repetitions, it doesn't support any simple idea of one thing following another either. Rather we live in two worlds: here on earth we live through events and do our best to learn from them; we grow, even though we know that our growth and our lives will come to an end in due course. But because we believe in God who is beyond time and has called us to an eternal relationship with himself, we know that our ultimate destination is also beyond time: it is not so much "after" this life as interwoven with it.

We do not need to see ourselves as trapped either in a circle or on a straight line. Rather, every single moment gives us a chance to accept the boundless gift and generosity of God. "Now" is the "time of salvation". Although humanly speaking we should do everything we can to maintain and enhance our health of mind, body and spirit, we should not trust it. Rather we should trust God who loves and receives us every single moment. This is very much the message of Christmas, God (beyond time) is with us (in time) - Immanuel.