

ABOUT TIME

**Four Lent discussions
exploring the rhythms of our
days, weeks, years and lives.**



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Session 1 INTRODUCTION

During our four sessions we will be exploring the significance of the succession of moments that make up our lives, the hours, days and seasons it consists of. By the end, I hope we might have at least the beginning of the answers to the questions:

What time is it? What day is it? What season is it? How old are we?

OPENING WORSHIP VERSES FROM PSALM 92

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
**to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,**
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.

**For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.**

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

**They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.**

In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,

**showing that the Lord is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.**

Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe.

Your word calls forth the dusk of evening and the morning light.

Your wisdom creates both night and day.

You determine the cycles of time.

You arrange the succession of seasons
and establish the stars in their heavenly courses.

Lord of the starry hosts is your name.

Living and eternal God, rule over us always.

Blessed be the Lord, whose word makes
evening fall and the sun to rise.

Amen

Jewish blessing prayer

- Think of as many words, phrases and sayings as you can which make reference to times and seasons.
- What do the words and phrases we have gathered tell us?

Session 1: Hours

- Do you have, or can you recall, any clocks or watches that have or had a special meaning to you?
- How do you feel about “wasting” time? What was the attitude to time in your family of origin?
- What are your favourite times of day – are you a lark or an owl?
- What’s your daily routine and how has it changed over the years?

BIBLE BASE

Read: Daniel 6.6-13, Mark 1.35 – 39

- What do these stories tell us about daily prayer routines?
- Why do you think it was important to Daniel to keep his routine of daily prayer, despite the threats to him?
- If you were Jesus, how would you have reacted when the disciples interrupted your prayer time?

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

“Fixed Hour” prayer

The idea of praying at fixed hours is an ancient one. We find it in the Bible, though it is often hinted at rather than explained, showing that people just assumed that readers would understand it, for example in Acts 3.1, when the Apostles are described as “going up to the Temple at the hour of prayer, at 3 o’clock in the afternoon”. This was the time of the daily evening sacrifice in the Temple. There was another in the morning (Exodus 29.38-39). The Psalms talk about praying multiple times a day (e.g. 119.164 “Seven times a day I praise you”)

When the Church moved away from its Jewish roots, it took this pattern of praying at fixed hours with it. A very early guide to Christian life called the *Didache*, probably written around 100 A.D. told Christians that they should say the Lord's Prayer three times a day. Other early Christian writings describe different numbers of set prayer times, so it is obvious that practices were quite diverse.

When monastic communities, dedicated to prayer, began to be formed in the 3rd Century, they developed the idea of fixed hour prayer, and made it one of the foundational characteristics of their communities.

Gradually the tradition of seven daily "offices" – orders of prayer – became established; *Matins/Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers* and *Compline*.

Prime, Terce, Sext and *None* take their names from four of the hours in Roman society – roughly 6,9,12 and 3 o'clock – the first, third, sixth and ninth hours of the Roman day. *Matins*, also called *Lauds*, was an office of prayer and praise (*laud* means praise) in the early hours of the morning, before dawn. *Vespers* is Latin for evening, and *Compline* (pronounced "complin" not "complyne") comes from the Latin word which is also at the root of the word "complete" – it finishes the day. Monks and nuns, especially those in contemplative communities, still set a very high priority on these daily prayers, stopping whatever else they are doing to gather together. Those who work outside the monasteries, for example in teaching or parish or missionary work may not always – like the rest of us – be able to drop everything to pray, but it is still the bedrock of their lives and they observe the fixed hours of prayer unless they have to be doing something else as part of their jobs or are travelling.

This "fixed hour" prayer was one of the driving forces behind attempts to tell the time accurately – some of our most ancient clocks are in cathedrals. While Seal church's clock is Victorian, we do have a reminder of a much earlier system of timekeeping in the church in the shape of a "mass dial", a sundial with markings showing when significant moments of prayer, and the daily mass, would have been held. It must



Seal church's "mass dial".

have been on an outside wall of the church originally, but has been reused (and turned upside down) to block up the old rood screen staircase, no longer needed after the medieval rood screen was removed sometime between the Reformation and the Civil war. You can still see it there.

By the Middle Ages, many lay people wanted to imitate the monastic pattern of prayer. It wasn't practical or possible for them to pray the entire, sometimes lengthy, services that the monks and nuns did, so shorter orders of prayer, designed to be prayed alone, were produced, called **Books of Hours**. The contents varied enormously, but they contained prayers and Psalms for the various hours of the day. Some were richly decorated, and probably designed to impress, but others were plain and simple, and were obviously well used. Often people added their own favourite prayers on blank pages, or stuck them into the book. Devout people were often painted with their Book of Hours, and the Virgin Mary is often shown reading one at the moment of the Annunciation.



Ambrosius Benson
1495-1550
Young woman in
Orison Reading a
Book of Hours.

After the Reformation, Books of Hours fell out of favour in England and other Protestant countries. Many of the prayers in them were addressed to the Virgin Mary, to whom Protestants did not pray, but Protestants also tended to be suspicious of any kind of rote prayer and ritual, especially since reciting prayers over and over again had often been seen as a way of gaining indulgences, time off from Purgatory, which Protestants did not believe in. Daily personal devotions became centred on Bible reading and extempore prayer, rather than reciting the prayers of others, although Anglicans always had and used the daily prayers of the Book of Common Prayer – Matins and Evensong.

In recent times, however, daily liturgical prayer has become more common and valued by Protestants and Anglicans, with daily prayer apps available as well as a host of books offering patterns of daily prayer.

- **Is daily prayer important to you? Where and how did you learn to pray? What time(s) of day do you pray?**

- **Do you use any particular format or devotional material? Do you pray using traditional prayers or do you always make up your own?**
- **What might be helpful, or not helpful, about doing this?**

Session 2: DAYS

Opening Worship

Verses from Psalm 118

O give thanks to the Lord for he is good;
His steadfast love endures forever!

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;

The Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.

With the Lord on my side I do not fear.

What can mortals do to me?

This is the day that the Lord has made;

Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

O give thanks for the Lord, for he is good,

For his steadfast love endures forever.

Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe.

Your word calls forth the dusk of evening and the morning light.

Your wisdom creates both night and day.

You determine the cycles of time.

You arrange the succession of seasons

and establish the stars in their heavenly courses.

Lord of the starry hosts is your name.

Living and eternal God, rule over us always.

Blessed be the Lord, whose word makes

evening fall and the sun to rise. **Amen**

- **Think about your week. Does it have a particular rhythm or pattern, with set things happening on different days? How do you feel about each day?**
- **What is, or was, the shape of your working week? Did you TGIF (Thank God It's Friday) or was there another day which was the equivalent for you?**
- **During the French Revolution the seven day week was replaced by a ten day week, but soon lapsed. Why do you think it didn't catch on?**

Today's Monday

Today's Monday
Monday is washing day
Is everybody happy?
You bet your life we are.

...

Tuesday's soup
Wednesday's roast beef
Thursday's shepherd's
pie
Friday's fish
Saturday's pay day
Sunday is church

Trad. Song

BIBLE BASE

Read Genesis 1 & Matt 12.9-14

The seven day week seems to have originated in Mesopotamia. Some scholars think that the Jewish people adopted it during the exile in Babylon, but others suggest that it was common across the Middle East so was always considered to be a natural pattern – seven was considered to be the number of completeness.

The distinctive feature of Judaism, though, was the sacredness they attached to the seventh day of the week.

- **In the reading from Genesis, God declares what happens on each day of the week “good”, not just the Sabbath. What is good in each day of your week?**
- **In the passage from Genesis, what is distinctive about the Sabbath day? Why do you think it became so special to the people of the Old Testament?**
- **Imagine yourself in the story from Matthew's Gospel. What are your reactions as you watch the story unfold? Can you understand why the Pharisees feel and react as they do?**

- **Are there special times in your week which you want to protect, whether on the Sabbath or not, and if so, how can you do so?**

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE – The weekly rhythm

It isn't known when Christians stopped observing the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, but they seem to have been keeping Sunday as a special day of worship at least by the middle of the second century, when a Christian leader called Justin Martyr wrote:

"We assemble together on Sunday because it is the first day, on which God transformed darkness and matter, and made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on that day...and he appeared to his apostles and disciples."

They didn't see Sunday as the equivalent of the Jewish Sabbath. In fact they may have seen it as a challenge to it. After all, Jesus had often got into trouble for not observing the Sabbath in the way others thought he should. Sunday wasn't, primarily, a day of rest, but the day of resurrection, as Justin Martyr's quote above points out. As they gathered to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday, they recalled the risen Jesus entering the locked room where the disciples were hiding and eating with them.

In the second and third centuries there is evidence that some Christian groups observed both Saturday and Sunday as special days, celebrating the Eucharist on the Saturday evening. Other Christian groups denounced Saturday Sabbath observance as being part of the Jewish faith from which they were trying to distance themselves and condemned it as idleness.

It was the Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century, who established Sunday as a day of rest, requiring rest from work for everyone except farmers "on the most honourable day of the Sun". Sunday was still not seen as a day of rest, though, but rather as a day of worship. It's not clear how much this was Constantine's idea, and how much he was influenced by pressure from the Christian leaders who had become powerful after he had adopted Christian faith, and declared it to be the official faith of the Empire.

Not just Sunday

Christians didn't consider Sunday to be the only significant day of the week. Early Christians were encouraged to fast twice a week, just as devout Jewish people had done. Jesus refers to this in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector, when the Pharisee boasts that he fasts twice a week (Luke 18.12). However, while Jewish people fasted on Monday and Thursday, Christians chose Wednesday and Friday – there is a lot of argument about whether this was simply to underline their differences, or whether there was some symbolic significance to this, for example in the fact that Jesus had been crucified on a Friday. Whatever the reason, fasting on Wednesday and Friday became established, and is still observed by some Christians. Catholic Christians traditionally do not eat meat on Fridays, eating fish instead.

- **How might we make each day of the week special and recognise its special character? (Think back to your answers to the early question about the pattern of your week).**
- **What might be important elements of our Sabbath day, making it feel like a holy day for us?**
- **What makes it difficult for you to keep the Sabbath day “holy”? What gets in the way?**



Session 3 SEASONS

Verses from Psalm 65

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;

you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.

**You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.**

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

**The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,**

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,

the valleys deck themselves with grain,

they shout and sing together for joy.

Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe.

Your word calls forth the dusk of evening and the morning light.

Your wisdom creates both night and day.

You determine the cycles of time.

You arrange the succession of seasons
and establish the stars in their heavenly courses.

Lord of the starry hosts is your name.

Living and eternal God, rule over us always.

Blessed be the Lord, whose word makes
evening fall and the sun to rise.

Amen

INTRODUCTION

- **What do you like and look forward to in each of the seasons of the year? How do you feel as the seasons change? Is there a particular thing which tells you that the seasons are changing?**
- **Have you ever lived somewhere where the seasons are very different from the UK? What was that like?**
- **Why do you think it feels as if the sun always shone in the summer when you were a child (if you do!)?**

BIBLE BASE

Read: Genesis 8.13-9.1, Jeremiah 5.22-24

- **Imagine you are Noah, or a member of his family. What impact would God's promise in 8.22 have on you?**
- **Why do you think it matters that God tells Noah and his family that "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease"?**
- **How do you feel about the prospect of a changing climate in which the seasons might be different from the way they are now?**

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE - Observing Liturgical Seasons

Seasonal celebrations – feasts and fasts – are probably as old as human history. Ancient peoples developed sophisticated ways of calculating dates by observing the sun and moon. Our ancestors were also alert to the crucial signs that the times for sowing and harvesting or the seasonal migration of animals they on which they depended were imminent. These moments were often marked with religious ritual. Ancient structures like Stonehenge are carefully aligned so that the sunlight strikes them in a particular way only at the winter solstice, for example.

Most of the feasts in the Old Testament, as well as commemorating events in the story of Israel, like the Exodus at Passover, were also agricultural festivals. Passover fell at the time of sowing the seeds, Pentecost at the time of the first fruits, for example.

There is evidence that the Church began observing particular times of the year in special ways very early in its history. Easter was the earliest feast to be established, followed probably by Epiphany, which was observed before Christmas itself.

As Christianity spread, it took its feasts with it and often these merged with festivals of the cultures which adopted it. This can provoke heated accusations that Christian festivals were imposed on pre-Christian beliefs in a deliberate attempt to suppress them, but the evidence is that it was far more complicated than that. People who became Christian were, like

all of us, creatures of habit, who knew their need of seasonal “markers”; a festival of light in the middle of a dark winter, for example. The Christian Christmas feasts, already well established by the time Christianity reached the UK, lent themselves very well to this, with their theme of Jesus who came as a light to the darkness. They carried practices from their old faiths with them, like the burning of a Yule log, but their new faith gave these practices a wider range of meanings.

By the Middle Ages, there was a rich tapestry of Christian feasts and fasts, though local observance of these was very varied over time and place. Each season and festival had its own customs, ceremonies and special prayers. Many of the Protestant Reformers, though, were very concerned at what they saw as superstition in the observances of the Christian year, which is why the Book of Common Prayer whittled the seasonal changes in worship to a minimum. The Holy Communion service was the same throughout the year; only the collects and readings gave any particular “flavour” to the seasons. Puritans like Oliver Cromwell went even further, attempting (briefly and unsuccessfully) to ban the celebration of Christmas, for example.

In the Church of England, it was the nineteenth century Oxford Movement which restored some of the old Medieval traditions and ceremonies. They were sometimes guilty of suggesting there had been far more uniformity than was really the case, for example in specifying colours of vestments for different times of year – in reality, Medieval priests had simply worn the best vestments they had for feasts, and the colours varied greatly. However, many of their “rediscoveries” are now taken for granted, and are an unquestioned part of our seasonal worship. The Church has also adopted customs from other denominations and traditions, like the Advent candles we light each Sunday in Advent, which was originally a German Lutheran tradition. New traditions continue to evolve to mark significant moments in the year. Remembrance Sunday is one – a commemoration which, obviously, only came into existence in the aftermath of WW1, but which is now an important day for many people.

- **Some Protestant churches are still reluctant to observe much seasonal variation, preferring to emphasize that Jesus is “the same, yesterday, today and forever.” (Hebrews 13.8) They look**

to verses like Isaiah 1.14 and 58.3-7. Do you think they have a point?

- How important is the cycle of the Church's Year to you? Are there particular services and seasons in the year which matter especially to you?
- Why do you think people need to observe special times and seasons?
- What if you don't feel Christmassy at Christmas, or you don't feel Easter joy at Easter? Is there still some value to keeping these festivals even when they don't match the "season" of our lives?

FOR NEXT WEEK – BRING ALONG SOME PHOTOS AND MAKE A TIMELINE IN ADVANCE IF YOU CAN!

Session 4 LIFETIMES

Verses from Psalm 139

O Lord you have searched me and known me.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with you.

Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe.

Your word calls forth the dusk of evening and the morning light.

Your wisdom creates both night and day.

You determine the cycles of time.
You arrange the succession of seasons
and establish the stars in their heavenly courses.
Lord of the starry hosts is your name.
Living and eternal God, rule over us always.
Blessed be the Lord, whose word makes
evening fall and the sun to rise.
Amen

INTRODUCTION

- **Make a timeline of your life. What are the high points, the low points, the turning points?**
- **Bring along some old photos of yourself. What do you feel about the person you see in them?**
- **How do you feel about being the age you are now?**
- **People sometimes say “in my day...” What do you think of this phrase? If you use it of yourself, when do you think “your day” was?**

BIBLE BASE

Read: Psalm 92.12-15, Proverbs 20.29, Matthew 18.1-5,

- **What do these passages tell us about age and aging?**
- **What do you find encouraging and/or challenging about them?**

Read: Ecclesiastes 3.1-8, Jeremiah 6.16, Psalm 90.12, John 10.10

- **What is God saying to us through these passages?**
- **When people die, their loved ones often say “they lived life to the full!” What do you think of this? What do you think a “full life” looks like?**
- **What difference does it make to the way we live our lives now if we believe we will live for eternity with God after death?**

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE – Rites of Passage

The Christian Church has marked different stages in life with rites of passage from very early in its history, developing distinctive rituals for

special moments. This is common to all religions. People seem to need to do something when they cross a threshold in their lives; when a child is born, when a marriage is made, when someone dies, the traditional “hatch, match and dispatch” moments.

But rites of passage can mark other significant moments in life too. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Judaism marks the moment when a young person takes on responsibility for keeping the Law (Mitzvah means commandment – Bar or Bat means son /daughter – you become a son or daughter of the commandments at this point). This usually happens around the age of 13, but just as older people can be baptised and confirmed in the Christian Church, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs can happen at any age, as a sign that someone is taking on the Jewish faith.

Rites of passage can mark the moment when we take up a new responsibility, or lay it down. Ordination is an important rite of passage in Christian faith, setting aside someone as a deacon or priest, and lay ministries are marked by licensing services, in which people are authorised and blessed for the work they are taking on. When a priest is appointed to a parish they are officially “installed”, literally put into the “stall” or seat reserved for the vicar.

Church communities naturally mark a whole assortment of other, less formal occasions too, saying farewell to those who are moving away, thanking and praying for churchwardens who are coming to the end of a time of office etc.

There are many secular rites of passage– graduations and retirements, for example. Birthdays are an annual rite of passage, whether they are celebrated with a big party, or just a card or a quick message on Facebook.

It seems natural to us to mark these occasions, and wrong if we don't. But the way in which rites of passage are marked is anything but fixed. Baptism, wedding and funeral ceremonies can take many forms, and have changed considerably over time. Marriage, for example, was once regarded basically as a secular contract, and people simply came into the church porch to have it blessed if they wanted to. The religious ceremony only became regarded as an important part of a wedding in the 13th

Century, and even at the beginning of the 17th Century it was not regarded as legally essential in the UK.

Baptism and confirmation were once a single rite carried out by a Bishop, but gradually became detached in the early centuries of the Church's life, because there were too many people wanting them and not enough bishops to go around. Baptism was delegated to priests, and children (or older people) were presented to the Bishop for confirmation when there happened to be one around. Baptism was the normal moment of admission to Holy Communion, and in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, babies are given bread and wine from the moment of baptism.

Funerals too, have changed immensely over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Requiem Mass was vital, and Masses were said repeatedly in the hopes this would set the deceased person's soul free from purgatory. Protestant reformers were horrified by this, holding that once someone had died they were in God's hands for judgement, and there was therefore no point in praying for them. The funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer was designed to be brief, simple and said at the graveside, not in church. It focussed almost entirely on the living, reminding them that they must amend their own lives and turn to Christ. They would have had no truck whatsoever with the modern trend for funerals to be a "celebration of life", for eulogies or for anything that sounded like you were speaking to the dead person (*Thanks for being a great mum, sleep peacefully, look down on us from heaven etc...*).

- **How many rites of passage – formal or informal – can you think of?**
- **What does it feel like when people fail to observe a rite of passage which is significant to you (e.g. a birthday or joining/leaving a job)?**
- **Many people now don't observe the traditional rites of passage like marriage, baptism, or even funerals. Why is this? What do you think we miss if we don't mark these moments?**
- **Can you think of occasions that don't have official rites of passage which ought to do?**
- **As we come to the end of this series of sessions on times and seasons, what will you take away from them?**