

The present opportunity
Proverbs 9:1-6, Ephesians 5:15-20

15 August 2021

A few years ago it was revealed in the press that Dame Judi Dench celebrated her 81st birthday by having a tattoo made on her right wrist, which read *Carpe diem*, the ancient Roman saying normally translated as 'Seize the day'. I found this interesting and, perhaps I may be forgiven that that was the picture that first came to my mind, when I read the sentence in Ephesians, 'use the present opportunity to the full'. It sounded suspiciously like *carpe diem*. This was not altogether a helpful association for me. From my school days I recalled what we were taught about *carpe diem*. It is a kind of life philosophy- it was said, - that teaches to seize every opportunity to increase one's own happiness without any thought to the future. Well, I don't know why Dame Judi chose it for her life motto, but the question certainly arises, is this, what the letter of Ephesians is talking about?

When we look at the saying *Carpe diem* we find that 'seizing the day' may not be the best translation of the original. Seizing has the connotation of a kind of pro-active, forceful, even violent action which makes you squeeze the available time dry of all its possibilities. It represents a kind of go-getter attitude, people, who know what they want, who get things done, because life is too short and happiness cannot wait. But there is an alternative way of translating the word, which has an agricultural or horticultural background: 'Plucking' the day or the moment. You pluck an ear of wheat, a fully ripened fruit, or an open flower, when they are ready, when they present themselves in a state their Creator prepared them to fulfil their destination. This action requires a kind of expectant calmness, which doesn't force, but discovers the gifts of a day and enjoys them fully for their own glory rather than simply for their usefulness to enhance one's happiness. I think we have learnt to appreciate this approach much more during the periods of Lockdown in the COVID pandemic.

To appreciate this subtle difference is a kind of wisdom, which is well recognised by the letter to the Ephesians, where 'using the present opportunity to the full' is connected to wise as opposed to foolish behaviour. As we look at our reading for today we remember that it is always dangerous to pick out a sentence or even part of a

sentence from a Biblical passage and present it as THE truth. It is far more productive to see where it comes from, what circumstances gave rise to it, to whom was it addressed and when; to see, if the idea is in line with other Biblical passages on the subject.

Of course, this supposes some knowledge of the Bible and it may be a good opportunity here to encourage you to look out for the three Life & Faith groups meeting in this church, all of them seeking to relate our biblical faith to our everyday life. They will re-start their meetings for the Autumn in September and their different programmes will appear in Family News.

So, the saying '*use the present opportunity to the full*' comes to us from the Letter to the Ephesians, which may make us think that there was some specific problem at the church of Ephesus, which the letter tried to put right. But when we delve into the background we find the letter was more likely to have been a kind of circular letter put together by more than one person which was making the rounds among the young Christian communities. Can we deduce from this that time management was a general sticking point with the early churches, I wonder? If so, we, in our day, also know about problems with time management. As we re-commence with our church activities after the summer and after the restricting times of the pandemic we have to weigh up what is it, that – given the limited time available – we want to prioritise in our church life.

Whilst '*plucking the moment*' alerts us to the fact that there is a 'right' time' for everything, as the Book of Ecclesiastes says in the OT, the original Greek phrase used in Ephesians takes our thoughts further. It is best captured in the King James Version of the Bible, which is worth reflecting on even if on the surface it might not make too much sense. It says: '...walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, *redeeming* the time...'. So, how do you redeem time? To redeem something indicates some kind of price being paid. It costs the redeemer to get hold of the commodity. When it is applied to time it means not only to recognise the right time for action, but being ready right there and then to pay the price, to make the sacrifice so that the given moment could be used to the full.

In the summer of 1982 an unusual sight appeared on a Manhattan Landfill site in New York. In the middle of the financial centre, among towering blocks of offices, a few blocks away from Wall Street and the World Trade Centre a 2 acre fully ripened golden wheat field showed up in the blazing sunshine. It was an amazing sight! It

was an artistic installation by Agnes Denes a contemporary New York based environmental artist. Like everyone else, who walked by, she saw the derelict site in the vicinity of the richest powerhouse of world economy, but unlike everyone else, she recognised it as the opportunity to make a statement about how the whole set-up was a parody of what happens in the world economy.

Using her artistic imagination, her time and energy, the help of all her friends and a commission from the Public Art Fund, she cleared the site, hand-sowed it with wheat and a few months later, harvested over 1000 pounds of wheat. The wheat then became part of a travelling conference reaching some 27 different countries highlighting world hunger and was distributed in small amounts to give people a starter kit for their own wheat production. Well, you could say, this artist truly redeemed the time of that one unique growing season.

I think this is what both the Proverbs passage and the Ephesian Letter are talking about; the wisdom to be gained by attending the Spirit's banquet, to be filled by the Spirit, because it enables the guests in an uncaring, sometimes evil world to discover the opportunities for good and loving action. We may not be able to reach the world-wide effect with our actions that the New York artist did, yet we may be surprised at how a well-used opportunity, a carefully chosen word, or a small, kind action can ripple through unexpected distances.

What I wish for all of us for the coming week is that we recognise the precious moments given to us for being on God's business. And when we do to make every moment count, to say the encouraging word, to overlook each other's weaknesses and step out for the extra mile in helping someone. And, to do it all in a spirit of gratitude for all the good things we, ourselves have received. It is with these thoughts that we accept the invitation to the Table of Thanksgiving, our Lord's banquet in Jesus' name. **Amen**

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