

The -DASH-

Between the Dates

At the time of writing this article it is less than a month into 2017, and the reviews of the big news stories of 2016 are still quite fresh in people's minds. I guess a few of the biggest of these have

been the British vote to leave the EU, the election of Donald Trump as the 45th US President, the ongoing refugee crisis and, in the arena of sport, the Euros in France and Team GB's achievements at the Rio 2016 Olympics and Paralympics. Another matter, though, that attracted much comment in 2016 was the unusually high number of celebrity deaths. In just one five-day period from 24th – 28th December 2016 the world lost two musicians, an entertainer, a writer and two actresses. Seeing the many tributes on the TV news took me back to an incident in work I clearly remembered from the first week of September 1997. That week the news headlines were almost completely dominated by the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. My work colleague, Dessie, had been away in Donegal for a few days the previous week, only returning home late on Saturday evening. Being first up on Sunday morning he had switched on the TV whilst making some breakfast, and noticed footage of Diana's charity work, but thought it was some type of documentary. Then the programme switched back to the studio and I clearly recall Dessie's words, 'Suddenly I saw the newsreader, the huge picture of Diana behind him, her name at the left-hand side of the screen, and two dates – *separated by just a short dash* – below. And my mouth just dropped as I realised she was dead.' A sudden and untimely death invariably generates much shock, but I think Dessie's reference to a 'short dash between the dates' so succinctly summed up the actual shortness of time, and the transience of even the longest earthly life. So it is to the subject of time I want to turn our thoughts for a few moments.

1. Time is SHORT. Psalm 90:10 contains these well known words: 'The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.' As a child I remember how a single week could seem like such a long time. Now I often can't believe how quickly a working week flies past! My mother is 88 years old now, and has commented to me on numerous occasions how, looking back, that it actually does not seem that long since she was a girl growing up at home. With advances in medicine and the treatment of many ailments, life expectancy has happily increased. Yet, even the longest earthly life is but as a tiny water droplet compared to the vast ocean of eternity. So the Psalmist was absolutely right when he cautioned himself: '*Remember how short my time is ...*' (Psalm 89:47). It has been wisely said, we complain that our days are short – yet often live as if they will never end.

2. Time is SWIFT. My mother once worked as an order process clerk in a weaving factory, and she was able to shed some light on the words in Job 7:6 – 'My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle ...' Mum told me of the rapid motion, as the little device sped frantically from side to side. Just seven chapters later we read these words: '(Man) cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not' (Job 14:2). We rejoice in the beauty of tulips in spring and roses in summer – but alas oh so quickly their glory fades, and they are gone. We see the long shadows cast by trees and tall structures – but once a cloud passes across the sun, they disappear in seconds. James in his epistle compares life to a vapour, that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away (James 4:14). If you have ever dumped the boilings from a saucepan, you will know how quickly that plume of vapour dissipates. Four separate biblical illustrations – yet all highlighting and confirming the same important truth – that time is swift.

3. Time can be **STOLEN**. How easy it is to while away evening after evening in front of a TV screen, yet watch very little of real or lasting value, or worse – I know, I've done it. With the advent of social media the usage of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become a fixture in countless people's daily lives. I, myself, joined Facebook a couple of months ago at the encouragement of a friend who now resides in New Zealand. Granted, it is a really convenient way of reconnecting with old school friends and sharing photographs with family and friends who live at home and abroad. But, having sat down one day over Christmas to have a look on Facebook for a supposed five minutes, before I knew it 45 minutes had passed by! So, whilst social media can and does have its benefits, it can also be addictive and something of a time stealer. The challenge is striking a right balance. But of course the biggest time stealer is procrastination – something that has rightly been defined as not only the thief of time, but also the grave of opportunity. '... Behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation.' (2 Cor 6:2)

4. Time can be **SQUANDERED**. When talking to a friend after last Christmas I asked if he was making any New Year resolutions. He smiled, said he wasn't good at resolutions, but said he would really like to improve his time management. People sometimes talk of 'killing time.' Killing is never a pleasant idea, and time is one of our most precious resources, much too precious to squander. Kill time and you murder opportunity. We can squander time by holding grudges and perpetuating petty squabbles – I am thinking of cousins who never have the chance to meet, play together and get to know each other – because a bitter fall out between siblings has meant their parents refuse to meet or speak to each other. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount about the need to be reconciled to our brother (Mt 5:23-24) are just ignored. We can squander time by tearing people down instead of trying to build them up, or being a wet blanket instead of endeavouring to encourage others. And, like the prodigal son, we can squander time by plunging into the pleasures that promise the world, yet which leave a bitter aftertaste. If that is where you are today, dear reader, it is never too late to repent and return. 'I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten ...' (Joel 2:25) Whilst God cannot give us back the time that has passed, there is a wonderful way in which He can restore to us the fruitfulness of our wasted years.

5. Time can be **SANCTIFIED** for God's glory. The word *sanctify* means to free from sin or evil, to set apart for a sacred use. But how can we do that? Psalm 118:24 proclaims: 'This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.' So we can be thankful to God for the time He has entrusted to us. We can endeavour, in our conduct, whether at work, rest or play, to glorify Him. 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.' (1 Cor 10:31). And, as the Puritan Joseph Alleine taught, we can count our time more precious than gold. 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.' (Psalm 90:12) When we realise that time is such a limited and precious resource, it can greatly affect how we value and treat it.

6. The whole issue of time, and our use of it, is a **SERIOUS** one – for at least four reasons. Firstly, life is uncertain (James 4:13). Despite our frailties, we can sometimes think that we're made of steel. Despite not even being guaranteed tomorrow, we can sometimes act and plan as if we know we're going to be around for a very long time. We're certainly not to be morbid, but we can lose sight of our mortality. And the fact life is uncertain leads us to the second reason why the issue is serious – we can have no true idea of how much time we actually have to do whatever we would for God. Consider the words of Jesus Himself in John 9:4 – 'I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.' Just as night limits day, so the inevitability of death or of meeting Christ in the clouds puts a limited time span on our activity for God. Thirdly, our influence for good and for God is needed right now – 'See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.' (Ephesians 5:15-16) The word 'circumspectly' means accurately or pointedly – aimed at a specific goal. I always remember a minister illustrating this word with the picture of a cat walking along a wall where there were numerous fragments of glass, watching every footprint as she moved along. How needful it is to watch our steps in days that are no less evil. And of course 'redeeming the time' speaks of buying it back for a fruitful purpose. Finally, our eternal

rewards are determined by how we live and how we serve God in the here and now. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul at the end of his pilgrimage here: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.' (2 Tim 4:7-8) How wonderful to have such a great testimony – and such a glorious hope!

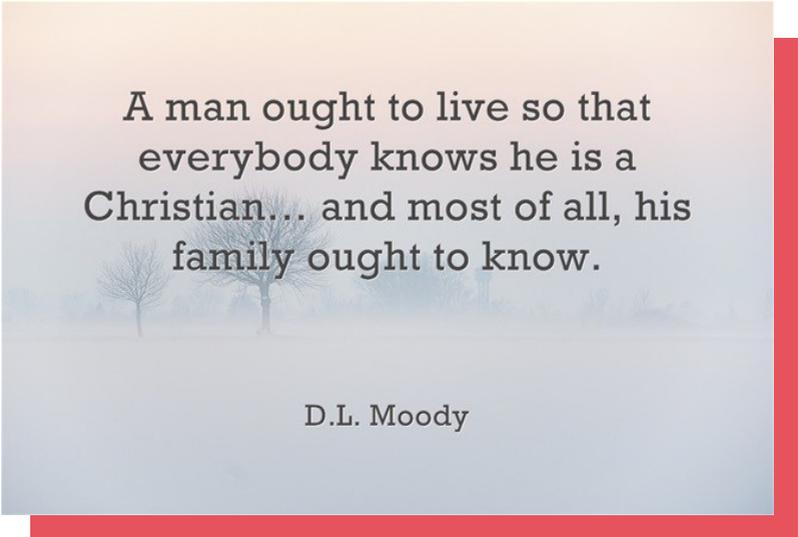
My late father used to often say: 'Only one life, will soon be past / 'Tis only what's done for Christ will last.' As we consider the challenge of 'the dash between the dates', may we respond in the words of the hymnwriter:

I have only one life on this earth
And as vapour it's passing away.
I must labour for treasures of worth,
Ere toil ends at the close of the day.

*Only one life to give,
I could never withhold it from God.
Only one life to live,
I must not miss the 'Well done!' of God.*

Only one life, and white are the fields,
With compassion this great need I view;
This one life that I have I will yield,
And the little I can, let me do.

One poor life, small the offering at best,
Yet the world and the flesh often call;
This my answer must be to each test:
I'll not serve God with less than my all.



A man ought to live so that
everybody knows he is a
Christian... and most of all, his
family ought to know.

D.L. Moody