

Anything But Ordinary: Worship and Preaching in Ordinary Time

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It begins on the Monday after Pentecost and extends through the Saturday before Advent. It has been called “Ordinary Time” in many churches since the reforms of Vatican II, and it is a period of time in the Christian year dreaded by many pastors and church members. After Pentecost the Sundays often seem to stretch on interminably: Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time. There are no special seasons to create interest and enthusiasm. Few special festivals break the routine. And, of course, summer is thrown right into the middle. At times, the period between Pentecost and Advent seems to be named all too appropriately: Ordinary Time—in the most common, and perhaps, worst sense of the term.

As with all terms, however, Christians need to be careful. It is not the culture around us that defines our terms, but the Christian narrative. And such is necessarily the case with “Ordinary Time.” Although our worship frequently lives down to the rather demeaning connotations of “ordinary” in our culture, in Christian usage “Ordinary Time” has a distinctive structure shaped by the story of Jesus Christ. In liturgical usage, “Ordinary Time” refers to that which is standard, the norm of time kept by the church in worship. This standard time is that of weekly Sunday worship, the worship of the Lord’s Day. Whereas the extra-ordinary cycles of Christmas and Easter highlight and intensify the incarnation and resurrection, Ordinary Time affirms weekly Lord’s Day worship as Christian Standard Time.¹ And here is where common understandings of “ordinary” break down; for Lord’s Day time is anything but ordinary.

The Lord’s Day is not the Jewish Sabbath, but the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. Each Lord’s Day the Christian community celebrates Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and enters into the new creation begun in Christ’s passover from death to life. Each Lord’s Day, as has frequently been noted, is a “little Easter.” Ordinary time for Christians is thus eschatological time, a participation in the new age that has broken into the world with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²

Early Christians frequently emphasized the eschatological character of Sunday by referring to the Lord’s Day as the “eighth day.” Just as God began the creation of the world on the first day of the week, so God has begun a new creation on the “eighth day,” the first day of the new creation. The Gospel of John provides a picture of this “eighth day” in the story of the resurrection (John 20: 1-18). Upon being raised from the dead, Jesus appears in a garden with Mary. A man, a woman, a garden. The allusion is clearly to Genesis 2, just as the Gospel of John opens with allusions to Genesis 1. In Jesus Christ, there is a new creation. The *Epistle of Barnabas* makes this point even more directly:

The present sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that which I have made, in which I will give rest to all things and make the beginning of an eighth day, that is the beginning of another world. Wherefore we also celebrate

with gladness the eighth day in which Jesus also rose from the dead, and was made manifest, and ascended into Heaven.³

In Lord's Day worship Christians enter "the beginning of another world."

Not surprisingly, the eschatological outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost probably took place on the Lord's Day and is liturgically celebrated on a Sunday.⁴ The vision recorded in the book of Revelation, which focuses on worship as the goal toward which creation is moving, also occurs on the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). On Sunday Christians thus participate in the goal of all creation. From this perspective the Lord's Day hardly sounds "ordinary."

Lord's Day worship is, as Don Saliers has written, a "praxis of eschatology."⁵ All too often, however, we fail to take this eschatological dimension of worship seriously. We continue to function on "ordinary time" in the world's sense. And when we do, it is no wonder that our worship becomes routine and tedious. An appreciation for the eschatological character of Lord's Day worship lies at the heart of the renewal of worship in the church's life, particularly during the many Sundays of Ordinary Time.

Eschatological Time

In order to comprehend more clearly the eschatological character of Ordinary Time, it is useful to consider some of our common conceptions of time and compare these with the perspectives and experiences of the earliest Christians. In modern, western industrialized culture, we are accustomed to thinking about reality according to chronological time, or what some might call "clock time."⁶ Chronological time is measured abstractly, according to clocks, watches, calendars, or even the rhythm of television programs during the day. This focus on measurable time tends to make us suppose that time is on a line; past, present, and future are merely points on a continuum stretching endlessly in both directions. This abstract conception of time shapes virtually every aspect of our cultural experience. We think it normal to buy and sell time, to measure our productivity by how much we have produced in an hour, and to keep detailed reminders of where we are supposed to be at what precise time. We know that in our economy "time is money." Many of us become anxious, even irritated, if our schedules are interrupted. The media, our economy, and our schools all lend a hand in shaping our almost exclusive orientation toward "chronological time."

This way of thinking about time, however, is historically and culturally conditioned. Most people throughout history did not—and even today in many parts of the world do not—organize life around the clock. Accurate clocks are a relatively recent invention. People in the biblical era, for example, had only vague, generalized ways of answering the question, "what time is it?"—especially if the question was asked in terms of "chronological time." It might be the "fourth watch," or "about midday," or "evening." Sundials or other crude devices for marking the passage of time did exist, but the vast majority of people did not rely on them.

In contrast, most ancient people, especially agrarian peoples, were oriented more toward seasons, or toward the "quality" or "kind of" time they were experiencing. Thus, the ancient Greeks distinguished between "chronos" time, which could be measured abstractly, and "kairos" time. "Kairos" time is experience oriented; rather than asking "what time is it?" it asks us to consider primarily "what *kind* of time is it?" An orientation toward "kairos" time, thus, tends to focus on the present moment, and may embrace both past and future, which are imaginary dimensions of experienced time.⁷

In some cases, “kairos” time may correspond to a lengthy span of “chronos” time, but be characterized by certain kinds of activities, behaviors, or expectations (as, for example, the “harvest” time). “Kairos” time also denotes brief, intense moments that shape consciousness in powerful ways, as did the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

Recognition of these diverse cultural perspectives on time is of great importance, especially when we encounter early Christian beliefs about the “end time” (the “eschaton”), or “the last days.” Our peculiar, primarily linear conceptions of time usually lead us to think about “the last days” or the “eschaton” as something still to come, somewhere out in the future, perhaps in a different realm of existence altogether. But the early Christians in all probability understood and experienced the “last days” not primarily with reference to “chronos” time, but as “kairos” time. The “last days,” in other words, denoted the time when God was bringing redemption and reconciliation to broken creation, when salvation was a present, experienced reality.

The early Christians knew that the resurrection of Jesus, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the “gathering of the nations” (i.e., Gentiles worshipping with Jews) were all experiences that Israel’s prophets had spoken of as defining “the last days” (see Isaiah 45). Moreover, all of these experiences were virtually unthinkable within their everyday world. The death and resurrection of Christ, the coming of the Spirit, and the gathering of reconciled peoples shattered their “fleshly” assumptions about the world and about life itself, including their perception about “what kind of time” they were living in. Their awareness of this different quality of time—eschatological time—had little to do with the passing of chronological time. Reading the “signs of the time” was a matter of having eyes to see and ears to hear—that is, to discern God’s presence and God’s fresh and powerful ways of working in the world—not a matter of counting the years or the days.

It is commonly assumed today that Christian awareness of “eschatological time” faded within the first few decades of the church’s existence, having been necessarily overshadowed by the passage of chronological time. This assumption, however, is rooted in our modern, primarily chronological and linear temporal orientations. There is widespread historical evidence to demonstrate that eschatological thinking and discernment remained a powerful factor in Christian self-consciousness—in the “great” church as well as in more apocalyptically oriented sectarian groups—throughout the early centuries of the church’s existence, long after the church had realized institutional stability.⁸

It was not the passage of chronological time that challenged the eschatological vision of the church, but more the shifts in thinking and orientation that took place in the wake of the conversion to Christianity of the emperor Constantine.⁹ Wayne Meeks has noted that eschatological thinking, with its conviction that the powers and assumptions of this world will pass away, necessarily undermines “the cultural system that masquerades as common sense.”¹⁰ In other words, Christian eschatology challenges attempts to domesticate Christianity to the social systems and thinking of this world. Consequently, in a world in which church and empire were one, eschatological thinking became deeply embarrassing. Even the Reformers, to the extent that they presumed Constantinian models of church and political power, were unable to reclaim the eschatological realism of the early Christians.

We in the mainline churches usually presume without question the theological

legacy of this embarrassment: we either project eschatological thinking into the distant chronological future, or interiorize and personalize it, so that it becomes an individual, psychological experience—that is, if we don't choose to ignore it altogether. However, in a day when many churches in North America are struggling to articulate a compelling vision and sense of mission beyond their own self-preservation, it is essential that we recover “last days” awareness, discernment, and practices.

“Ordinary” Worship

Discernment of the reality of the last days was both nurtured and realized among the early Christians in their worshiping communities, where congregations of believers gathered for worship in household settings and continued to experience eschatological time—unique “kairos” time, outside the realm of the world’s experience of time. Today worship is likewise the primary setting where eschatological realities become incarnate in the Body of Christ, and where the disciplines of “eschatological vision” are practiced. To put the matter another way, Christian worship involves the reorganization of our perceptions of space, time, identity, and relationships according to eschatological reality.

The anthropologist Victor Turner has described the workings of ritual—especially ritual that involves pilgrimage and transformation—in ways that provide a suggestive point of comparison with Christian worship.¹¹ According to Turner, ritual activity takes the participant into a transitional mode of experience, where one loses touch with many of the social structures and cues that normally define and impinge upon our identities. When we worship, it is not important that, for example, we are bankers, or teachers, or housewives, that we are males or females, or that we are poor, rich, or middle class. Nor does it matter what part of the world we come from, or what color our skin is. During worship we enter into space where the phones (usually!) do not ring, where there is no television or radio, and where the assumptions and relationships that govern our lives in the business world or at the shopping mall or in the home do not prevail. Rather, what does define us during worship—and this alone—is our common relationship to the God of Jesus Christ.

Turner suggests that in this kind of experience, people enter into the realm of “potential,” where they consider their lives more from the perspective of what “might be” than from the perspective of “what is,” that is, the perspective dictated to us by the world. In this space, worshipers may discover a profound sense of freedom from the limitations and restrictions placed upon them by their everyday social roles, and may begin to explore new ways of being human. The Apostle Paul describes something like this when he speaks of the movement of Christians from life “in the flesh” or “under sin” to life “in the Spirit.” When they are “in the Spirit of Christ,” Christians have the possibility of living in true freedom, the state in which we draw closer to what God intended us to be.

The writings of the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, suggest that the early Christians practiced much more intimate and egalitarian forms of social interaction during worship than was typical during daily life in antiquity. The Spirit poured out on Christian women and men made possible a rich diversity of “gifts” for the sake of the common good.¹² Here again, Turner’s studies of ritual provide a helpful point of comparison; he notes that in ritual many participants experience less alienating and more satisfying social interaction, for they are no longer defined by the

normal social roles they play, but can participate as whole human beings. These new ways of interacting often lead to powerful personal and social transformation and to a quality of “community” that cannot be achieved in ordinary life.¹³

In short, during Christian worship we are set free from bondage to the ways of this broken world and can experience firsthand what God intended us to be.¹⁴ Within the peculiar time and space that is Christian worship, we can discern more clearly what is possible for our life together as people of God’s new creation, and we can “practice” the disciplines (e.g., repentance, imitation of and participation with Christ, reconciliation, and freedom) that mark the life of discipleship. All of this is possible because in eschatological time and space God has drawn near to us to forgive, restore, and remold us in the image of Jesus Christ. In other words, in worship a genuinely new story governs our self-understanding and world view—the story of God present among us. This story is real and true, and it puts the lie to the myths we take for granted in the everyday world. Thus, eschatological worship is not an imaginary time and space; it is rather the time and space wherein our imagination is renewed, wherein we are enabled to “see” reality with different eyes. All of this is “ordinary” for Christians!

Yet all of this is imperiled if we come to worship without these eschatological expectations. Then worship becomes simply “ordinary”—just another gathering ordered by the world’s sense of reality. When we worship without the conviction that we are God’s people gathered as a witness to what God is doing in the last days, we witness only to the power of gods of our own making. For Christians, “ordinary time” must be eschatological time, lest it become another expression of the world’s ways of perceiving and reckoning time.

“Ordinary” Preaching

As a part of Lord’s Day worship, “ordinary” Christian preaching participates in and contributes to the eschatological character of that worship. Such preaching, however, is not eschatological because it explains the doctrine of eschatology or speaks about the end of the world in the chronologically distant future. Rather, “ordinary” Christian preaching is eschatological in that it helps the church enter into a new quality of time, which is characterized by the new creation that has broken into the world in Jesus Christ. Such preaching helps the church move outside the everyday routine, outside the normal social structures, into a realm of potentiality, where faithful response to the way of Jesus becomes possible. To draw upon the metaphor of vision, which plays an important role in biblical eschatology, “ordinary” Christian preaching redescribes the world and helps the church see the world differently, so that we might return to the everyday with new vision and new ways of living.

A prime example of such eschatological preaching is Jesus’ own Sermon on the Mount. The sermon aims to constitute the people of God for life within the reign of God, God’s new time.¹⁵ Significantly, the sermon begins with the Beatitudes, eschatological blessings which redescribe the ordinary world and turn the everyday structures of reality on their head. The indicative, assertive language of the Beatitudes is instructive. The sermon begins not with moral demands, but with claims about the way God’s world really is. The Beatitudes redescribe the world, giving the people of God a new vision of what is “ordinary.” Only after Jesus gives the new vision does he spell out the radical/“ordinary” implications for the life of the community. For it is only within the new time announced in the Beatitudes that the way of the Sermon

on the Mount becomes possible.

The new reality Jesus announces is incredible, even absurd. It is necessarily depicted in language that is tensive and unsettling. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn Blessed are the meek. . . ." Here is a conjunction of realities that simply do not fit together in an ancient society based on honor—or in our own status-conscious culture. "Blessed" and "poor in spirit" or "blessed" and "meek" are unthinkable conjunctions that invite the hearers outside the everyday structures of reality into "another world." The language creates a situation charged with the potential for transformation. Old structures and certainties are broken down, opening the way for new relationships and a new quality of life.

Such tensive juxtapositions are characteristic of much eschatological speech. Isaiah announces that the wolf shall live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). Paul proclaims that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Galatians 3: 28; NRSV). In the Book of Revelation, the figure who can open the scroll is not the Lion of Judah, as one might expect (even today in a time shaped by the myth of "The Lion King"). Rather, just at the point when the Lion should come on the stage, the one who appears as the center and goal of all time is the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5). Eschatological preaching engages in this kind of daring speech, which turns everything upside down and invites the church to "look at things in the strangest and wildest ways."¹⁶ Such preaching is not "ordinary" in the common sense of the term, but is in fact a radical redescription of the ordinary.

As the above examples indicate, the Sermon on the Mount is only one type of eschatological preaching. Such preaching can take other forms as well, from the narrative shape of the parables, with their rhetoric of excess; to the arguments of Paul, with their eschatological logic grounded in the story of Jesus; to the fantastic apocalyptic imagery of John of Patmos.¹⁷ Indeed, this tensive, extravagant speech lies at the very center of the gospel we preach—the cross and resurrection—and permeates the language of the New Testament. For Christians, this speech is not strange, but "ordinary"; it is the standard speech for preaching the gospel on the Lord's Day.

Ordinary Time thus finally poses the question to the church: What is "ordinary" for Christians? In our worship and our preaching we perform our answer to that question every Sunday. Only when the eschatological time inaugurated by Jesus Christ becomes "ordinary" for the church will our life and worship be renewed.

NOTES

¹ For a helpful discussion of Ordinary Time, see *Liturgical Year: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 7* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 49-54.

² On the Lord's Day see H. B. Porter, *The Day of Light: The Biblical and Liturgical Meaning of Sunday* (Washington, D. C.: The Pastoral Press, 1987); also Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, vol. 3, University of Notre Dame Liturgical Studies (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 242-261.

³ Cited in Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Divine Glory* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 53. Saliers's book is an excellent resource on the eschatological character of Christian worship. For an African-American perspective on the eschatological character of worship, see James H. Cone, "Sanctification, Liberation, and Black Worship," *Nexus* 24 (1981/82): 2-12.

⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between Pentecost and the Lord's Day, see Porter, 37-42.

⁵ Saliers, 52.

⁶ The following discussion of time draws heavily upon Bruce Malina, "Christ and Time: Swiss or

Mediterranean?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (January 1989): 1-31.

⁷ In addition to the article by Malina cited above, see the articles by Paul S. Minear, "Time and the Kingdom," *The Journal of Religion* 24 (April 1944): 77-88; and "The Time of Hope in the New Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 337-361.

⁸ See Brian E. Daley, S.J., *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁹ For an informative discussion of the ways the Church found it necessary to rethink prior conceptions of "time" and "space" after the conversion of Constantine, see Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 180.

¹¹ The best introduction to Turner's work can be found in his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969). An excellent critical resource on Turner's work is Bobby Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991). See also the discussion of Turner in Tom Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

¹² See especially 1 Corinthians 12, but also the description of the earliest Christians' "life together" in Jerusalem in Acts 2:42-47.

¹³ Compare especially Acts 2:43-46.

¹⁴ Christian worship has, of course, been perverted. Many women, for example, do not experience the eschatological reality of which we are speaking in male-dominated, hierarchical forms of worship. We are suggesting that the true character of Christian worship stands in judgment over all such perversions. Although we are not exploring this issue here, the eschatological character of Christian worship will have significant implications for the structures of worship, including the roles of "lay" and "ordained" persons.

¹⁵ See Stanley Hauerwas, "A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount," in *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 63-72.

¹⁶ "The Faith of Children: An Interview with Robert Coles," *Sojourners* (May 12, 1982): 16.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the "rhetoric of excess," see Stephen H. Webb, "Theology and the Rhetoric of Excess (Toward a Christian Hyperbolic Imagination)," *Biblical Literacy Today* (Spring 1994): 4-6. For an extensive treatment of Paul's "logic" and its relation to the story of Jesus, see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, SBL Dissertation Series 56 (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983). For a lively defense of the significance of apocalyptic language, see Stanley Hauerwas and Jeff Powell, "Creation as Apocalyptic: A Tribute to William Stringfellow," in Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), 107-115.