

**“IMPECCABLE TIMING”**  
***Romans 5:1-8***

Over the next few weeks there will be a number of things which affect the 11 o'clock service particularly (not least, Christmas), so we're going to take a break from our studies in Matthew's Gospel until the New Year, but I hope that some of the themes we've been looking at over the past few months will re-appear in the other passages we look at. That's very much the case this morning, in fact.

I'd turned to these few sentences in Paul's *Letter To The Romans* as what he says here is very much the at heart of the good news of Jesus which we're remembering this morning as we take the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The intention was to reflect on v8, which is probably the most amazing verse in the whole Bible, the one which sums up God's grace succinctly and dramatically. As I was reading through the passage, however, another phrase popped up off the page and cried, "Look at me! Look at me!" It's those four words at the start of v6.

Paul has started to talk about the way in which our justification through faith has opened the way for us to experience peace with God (v1) and a sense of hope in him (vv2,3) which is available to us through the agency of his Holy Spirit. That's the root of all Paul is saying in this letter, really. But he continues in v6, "*You see ...*" – a little pointer to the fact that he is going to go on and explain something in more detail – and then says (and these are the words that struck me), "*at just the right time*". All these things that God did for humanity in sending Jesus among us, allowing him to die and restoring him to life – all these things were done "*at just the right time*".

Now, if you've been following the argument that we've traced through the first few chapters of Matthew's Gospel, those words should ring a little bell in the back of your minds. We've been seeing how Matthew, the good Jewish boy, has been demonstrating through his Gospel that it's OK for the first Jewish Christians to believe in Jesus. He has shown again and again – not least in the quotations and allusions which he scatters through the stories of Jesus' birth – that Jesus is the Kingly Messiah whom God had promised through the preaching and prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures – our Old Testament – and that he had come along at the time God intended to be the fulfilment of all those promises. So it was actually OK for them to believe in Jesus – in fact, it was the logical response to all that God had already said. And several times we have commented on the timing of God's gift to humanity.

And Jesus himself, particularly if you read through John's Gospel, made it clear that he, too, was aware of the timing of God's plan. Although he had come into our world and was engaged in preaching, teaching and giving glimpses of the Kingdom of God through his miracles and healings and exorcisms, he knew that the right moment for the great saving act of God had not quite arrived. Read through that Gospel of John some time and note the number of times either Jesus says, "*My time has not come*" or John comments that his time had not come, or the time wasn't right. Just like good comedy or clever political initiatives, timing is everything.

And here is Paul saying that Jesus came to die "*at just the right time*". You may already know this, but there are two words in Greek for "time". One is *chronos* from which we get English words such as "chronology" and "chronometer". That's all about time as a continuum: "*time, like and ever rolling stream*", as we sang last week: "*times and seasons*" as the good old Prayer Book so often puts it. So, the right time would be on the right date or at the right hour of the day. The other Greek word is *kairos*, which means the crucial moment, the window of opportunity, that particular point in a plan or a project. As you may have guessed, Paul is using the second word here. This is not about the right moment in history, as such. When Paul talks about Christ's dying "*when we were still powerless*", he's not implying that the people of the first century were any more powerless than at any other time in history, that they needed saving any more than we do now or than humanity did in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. He's talking about the right point in God's plan.

You see, as we've seen already in Matthew's Gospel, God had a plan for the salvation of humanity which he made known pretty well at the dawn of time as sin and evil began to make their mark on the world, a plan that he had actually hatched back in the eternity before creation. He wanted, in his immense love and amazing grace, to save human beings – you and me – from the effects, the consequences and the power of sin. And he made sure everything was properly in place before Jesus burst into our world in the mess and muck of the Bethlehem stable really to move that plan to its awesome conclusion. Matthew spotted that as he worked out the parallels with all the prophecies and promises which God had proclaimed through the words of the Hebrew preachers. Mark heard it as Jesus strode into the Galilean backwoods crying, *"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news"* (Mark 1:15). Paul, the good Jewish scholar, spotted it and wrote not only to the Romans, but also to the Galatians, saying *"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son"* (Galatians 4:4).

It was always going to happen, really. As we've said already, God had announced his intentions to humanity at the very moment he exiled them from Eden. "One day this will all be sorted out. In my good time the forces of evil, now given shape in the body of this serpent, will be definitively defeated by a person descended from these two humans who have disobeyed me." And he kept on announcing it through the mouths of his prophets and preachers, poets and princes. But for them, for those limited, earthbound, vulnerable human channels of God's good news, there was always an inevitable tension. Have a look through the Psalms, through the books of prophecy, and notice how often you read that little phrase, *"How long?"* These men – and a few women – fervently believed that God had a plan and that he was going to bring it to fruition, and they faithfully proclaimed that. But they couldn't actually see any sign of it happening. They could see invasion and exile, plague and famine, gloom and despair – but how long would they have to wait for God to do what he said he'd do?

The problem is, we human beings have such a limited view, such a narrow perspective. We see what is around us. We interpret things in the light of what has already happened. We deal with the familiar and the probable. God sees the broad sweep of history – not only what has happened but what is going to happen. He is the God of the impossible and the unimaginable. His knowledge is, as the Psalmist sang, *"too wonderful for us, too lofty for us to attain."* But he knows what he wants to do. He has his plan. And he knows when he will act. It's all set out somewhere in the divine blueprint and project plan. And then, *"at just the right time"*, it happened. God did what he'd planned and suddenly it all started to make sense. Just as history – *chronos* – climaxed on the cross at Golgotha (as we'll commemorate in a few moments), so too the right time arrived – *kairos* – in God's plan. As the powers of evil were finally crushed through the sacrifice of Jesus the Kingly Messiah and Suffering Servant, so Jesus screamed, *"It is finished!"* The plan had come together. All was being fulfilled. God's amazing grace was demonstrated, because it was *his* plan, a plan in which we could play no part because *"we were still powerless"*.

And that is an awe-inspiring fact. In the vastness of the cosmos, in the great sweep of human history, God had his plan. Those who had cried *"How long?"* may not have seen it fulfilled, but they foresaw something of it. And in the detail of our everyday lives, in the dreary desperation of our pain and problems, the same holds true. We may be struggling through the most awful circumstances – anxious, scared, unsure what on earth is going on – and crying out to God, *"How long?"* We may have been praying for something for weeks, months, years and it seems as if it is making no difference whatsoever. But just as those Old Testament prophets and poets expressed their frustration but knew deep within themselves that God would work it out, so too we must hold on to that belief that God will work, that, despite our powerlessness and our fragility, *"at just the right time"* the One who can see what we can't, the One who has plans that we cannot even begin to understand, will sort it out. It may sound trite and simplistic – even sometimes insensitive – but the experience of God's people through the centuries and the experience of humanity in salvation, proves that God's timing is impeccable.

And one day, also as part of God's tremendous plan, all will finally become clear and all will be put to rights once and for all. Jesus will return and, again with impeccable timing, bring to fulfilment this wonderful Kingdom of which he has offered us so many tantalising glimpses. We hang on to that. We believe that. We proclaim that in our worship this morning. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *"whenever*

*you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" In this simple meal we sense the tension of "*How long?*" and "*at just the right time*".

As we eat and drink and sing and pray together this morning, we ask God to come close to us again. We call on Emmanuel, God With Us, to re-assure us, to comfort us, to lift our gaze to the Almighty, Inimitable Father who holds it all in his loving hand. His timing is impeccable and his grace is amazing. As we affirm in the words of our next song (*Here is bread, here is wine* MP842), "*in this moment, by the Spirit, Christ is with us here*" – just in time.

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God kept on announcing it through the mouths of his prophets. But for them there was always an inevitable tension. The prophets fervently believed that God had a plan and that he was going to bring it to fruition, and they faithfully proclaimed that. But they also cried out, "*How long?*" The problem is, we human beings have such a limited view, such a narrow perspective. God sees the broad sweep of history – not only what has happened but what is going to happen. And in the detail of our everyday lives, in the dreary desperation of our pain and problems, the same holds true. We may be struggling through the most awful circumstances – anxious, scared, unsure what on earth is going on – and crying out to God, "*How long?*" But just as those Old Testament prophets and poets expressed their frustration but knew deep within themselves that God would work it out, so too we must hold on to that belief that God will work, that, despite our powerlessness and our fragility, "*at just the right time*" the One who can see what we can't, the One who has plans that we cannot even begin to understand, will sort it out.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What things in the Old Testament show us that God had a plan?
2. The Psalmists and the prophets often cried out "*How long?*" Is it OK to express our frustration to God? Why/why not?
3. Share any examples from your own experience of God's timing being impeccable.
4. Is it right to assume that, because God has done it before, he will do it again? Why/why not?
5. How do you cope with the tension between "*How long?*" and "*At just the right time*"?

