

October 23, 2005
James, the Brother of God

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Whereas English has only one word for time, other European languages more carefully distinguish between time as instance ("How many times?") and time as sequence ("How much time?").

The ancient Greeks, who thought a great deal about time (among many subjects), also had two different words that we English-speakers are forced to translate with the single word "time." Since there is a very profound difference between those two words, and because time is an important theological subject in the New Testament (itself written in Greek), it is useful to examine this difference.

The first Greek term is *chronos*, meaning time on the move, time as before and after, time as the future passing through the present and so becoming the past. From this Greek word *chronos* we derive such English terms as chronic, chronicle, and chronology. Thus, we call an illness chronic if it lasts a long time. A chronicle is an account of events through a sequence of time. Chronology is the itemized, studied measurement of time.

Indeed, measurement is one of the distinguishing characteristics of *chronos*, which is a quantitative concept. Time that cannot be measured is not *chronos*. Time in this sense is dimensional, quantifiable; it can be "accounted for."

It is very important, moreover, to measure *chronos* in order to give it identifiable shape, to gain imaginative and rational control over it, because *chronos* is otherwise wild and destructive. The Greeks believed it ate its children. *Chronos*, you see, is sort of crazy. It is not only dimensional; it readily becomes demented.

Indeed, time does not truly exist in the way that other familiar things exist. I cannot hear it. It has no fragrance. I can't point to it and say, "Aha, there it is. Don't let it get away!" Time in a sense is terribly close to non-existence. After all, *chronos* deals with the past and future, neither of which has real existence.

No wonder, then, that *chronos* is so difficult to measure. I mean, how do we enclose time and say, "hey, stand still, you, so we can size you up." The only way to measure time, in fact, is by some arbitrary reference to

space, and we normally use spatial prepositions with respect to it, such as the earth's journey *around* the sun, or the shadow's daily progression *across* a sundial, and the cockcrow *through* the night.

Now *chronos*, because it is made up of some things that don't exist anymore and other things that don't yet exist, is a true image of non-existence, a veritable icon of death. In fact, only dead time can be measured. Moreover, *chronos* is, in this respect, rather ghoulish. Even dead, it continues to feed on us. We may speak of "killing time," but it invariably ends up killing us. *Chronos* is, therefore, an image of everlasting death, what the Bible calls the "bottomless pit," or hell. What is hell but the reign of death in ongoing, unending sequence?

In addition to *chronos*, however, the Greeks also spoke of time as a moment, time as occasion, time as qualitative rather than quantitative, time as significant rather than dimensional. This second word for time is *kairos*.

Strictly speaking, we don't measure *kairos*. We don't ask someone, for example, "*How much* Christmas did you have?" We inquire, rather, "*what sort of* Christmas did you have?" With *kairos* we employ the category of *qualis*, not *quantum*.

The reason that time in the sense of *kairos* cannot be measured is because it is always a now. A now is obviously indivisible; an instant is, so to speak, too brief to account for. By the time you stop to measure a now, it is already gone. Now is punctuated by a swift, indecipherable passage from this to that. Furthermore, if now cannot be measured, it can also not be counted. It is futile, for example, and probably a threat to sanity, to ask how many nows there are in an hour.

Unlike the past and the future, nonetheless, the now really exists. Indeed, now is the only time that does exist. In the strictest sense, "there's no time like now."

Kairos, because it is present, is an icon of eternal life. To experience the now, after all, one must be alive. The dead know nothing of now. Therefore, the now, the *kairos*, is an icon of the life of heaven. Indeed, eternal life is an everlasting now, in which there is no sequence, no before and after.

Eternity is not a long time. Strictly speaking, there is simply no length to it. Nothing elapses. The infinite is not measurable. Thus, "when we've

been there ten thousand years/ bright shining as the sun/ we've no less days to sing God's praise/ than when we've first begun."

Here on earth, *kairos* is time as significant and decisive. This is the time of which St. Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 6:1--"In a favorable time (*kairo dekte*) I heard you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the most favorable time (*nun kairos euprosdektos*); behold, now (*nun*) is the day of salvation." The only time we can ever really seize is the now. Now is the present instant, the marked pulsing of the heart, the moment to lay hold on eternity.

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