

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **NUMBERING OUR DAYS**

**22<sup>nd</sup> January 2017**

Psalm 90:1-17

Matthew 11:16-19

How old are you? When is your birthday? You know these things, don't you? Your birthday looms out of the calendar each year. You may hear that there is to be an election, or a meeting, or a funeral, or a party on that one day in 365, and even if you don't say so, you register "That's my birthday!" At each of our Messy Church gatherings, at tea time I go around the people seated at the tables and ask if anyone has a birthday in the next month. Only the very youngest present don't know, and I have to keep my wits about me for those children who willingly pretend that they have a birthday looming, when in fact they do not! You see, all those with birthdays in the next month have Happy Birthday sung to them, and they share a cake.

But all this fuss about birthdays, in the history of the world, that is a recent phenomenon. Even now there are some very old people in the world whose claim to age – or to a specific age – cannot be verified, because their births were not recorded, or the records have been lost.

Meanwhile we call this year 2017, but in the Islamic world it is 1438, becoming 1439 on September 21st, at their new year. In February the Chinese will enter into the year of the rooster (although they use the Gregorian calendar that we use for business purposes). And in the Jewish religious calendar we are in the year 5777, numbering the Biblical years back to creation – although most Jews now admit that there must have been more years in the history of the world than that. All sorts of calendars, all sorts of ways of numbering our days.

But we have not had these ways always. It wasn't until the Roman empire became Christian and began to date things from around the time of Jesus' birth – before or afterwards – that years had a fixed point. The Jews also had not developed their way of numbering the years before then. This is why in the Bible, you do not find exact dates given. Instead people reckoned when things happened, by family events – the year after the twins were born, or the year your uncle got married. For national events, they might refer to astrological happenings: two years after the comet, or national events, such as when Isaiah says that he had a vision in the temple "in the year that King Uzziah died."

It's all fascinating stuff – or I think so – but what has it to do with our quest for wisdom? Well, in his Psalm which we read today, Moses, the man of God is thinking about life and how to understand it and live it well – he is thinking, therefore, about

wisdom. And he says “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” And that wasn’t so straightforward in his days, that numbering of days. Yes, the months had names, but it was easy to live more in an eternal annual cycle when there was not a universal fixed point from which to count.

The Psalm is full of numbering of life. *“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.”* That is how the Authorised version puts it, which many of you will have lodged in your minds.

Moses wants us to look at ourselves and our place in the world and be wise in how we see ourselves. So he talks of God as our dwelling place in all generations – another way of counting. He sings of the beginning of creation, and of our bodies returning to the dust. He reminds himself and us that God does not view time as we do – that a thousand years are to God as short as yesterday, or even a watch in the night, which is four hours or so. Wisdom, remember, is about looking at life in God’s way, learning to think about things as God does, and remembering that God is outside time, is a part of that. Perhaps it is good to remind ourselves that not all cultures have always counted days and months and years as we do – there is more than one way of counting time, and God’s way is different from ours. It is not an easy thing to get our heads around, but it opens our minds and changes our view of the world, and our impatience for immediate happenings when we try.

Moses thinks about how this means that God can hold all our flaws and failings in view at once, and concludes that thinking, remembering this should help us live wisely, aware of the length of days we have had, aware of the brevity of even the longest human life.

We should number our days. But there are more ways of numbering than mere counting. There is the numbering we do when we think of how many children or grandchildren we have, when we count up our dearest treasures. That is a numbering which counts, not the amount of something, but the value of it. Another way to think of that injunction to value our days is to read it as “teach us to treasure our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Life may be short and full of difficulties, as the psalm says, but that does not mean it is not to be valued and treasured. Instinctively we know that. For most people, the urge to stay alive, even in the most appalling situations of grief or suffering is a natural human reaction.

If we are to be wise in the living of our lives, we should treasure the days that God gives us, and make the most of them, whether they be many or few. It may be that, as the Psalm says “our years come to an end with a sigh”, but that is no reason to hide from the life we are given. One of the most wonderful things that Jesus said - you will find it in John’s gospel chapter 10 – is “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” or as some translations put it – “Life in all its fullness.” As children of God and followers of Jesus, we need not lament too much the wrongdoing in our lives, though we should repudiate and turn from it. As children of God and followers of Jesus we do not need to cower under the threat of God’s wrath. Instead, turning from ourselves and towards God we can step out into all the opportunities that our lives bring us, and live them to the full in his service and praise.

Not all of us will do this in the same way – that is one of the wonderful things about God’s family – being children of God does not quench our individuality. In fact, it

does the opposite and enhances it! When Jesus was speaking of John the Baptist, and, as we saw a few weeks ago, commending him as one of the greatest human beings, he then went on to compare John and himself.

John, you remember, was something of an ascetic, living a very simple, austere lifestyle and bringing an austere message. And although he initially had popularity, the mainstream did not accept his words. Jesus, on the contrary, was gregarious, going around with a bunch of friends and followers. He attended weddings and made wine, he fed people rather than demanding that they fast, he healed and did not condemn by connecting illness with sin. And again, the mainstream of the population, and especially the leadership, would not take him seriously. And he compared the people to children in a market-place inviting their peers to come and play weddings – we piped for you – but their friends turning away. So then the children invited them to do the opposite, to play funerals – we wailed – but again they were rebuffed. There was no pleasing their peers.

And Jesus was saying that there was no pleasing his people, as perhaps there is no pleasing any people. John was not wrong to come as he did, in austerity, and Jesus was not wrong to come with a very different approach to talking about God and his purposes. “Wisdom,” said Jesus “is vindicated by her deeds.” Or some versions of his words say “Wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” As we lead the full lives that Jesus came to give us, as we number our days by treasuring them, we will not all take the same approach. Our lives will not all look the same.

Some of us will treasure our days by living quietly, and others by being more lively. Some of us will live close to our homes all our days, and find perfect fulfilment, while others of us will seek to travel over the country or over the world. Some of us will feel the need to be creative, in art or craft, in word or music, while others of us will value what is produced. Some of us will hold being part of a family as the most precious gift life can give, while others will find fulfilment in solitude or in a circle of friends. And wisdom is known by all her children. In other words it takes all of us in different ways treasuring our days in the light of God’s love, making our dwelling in the Lord our God to show the wisdom of God to the world.

We will not all express the wisdom we find in treasuring our days in the same way. As we consider the nature of life with the difficulties and sorrows which even a peaceful life will have, as we consider how God sees all ends at once, seeing a thousand years as a watch in the night, as we remember that we live in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we won’t all draw the same conclusions about how best we should live. But if we remember that wisdom comes from knowing that God sees more than we do, and that we live with him as our dwelling place, our home, where we belong, then each of us in our own way will, with his help, learn to number our days as jewels on a necklace. We will learn to live as those who value every minute of life that God gives us, and who aim to live it to the full. Amen.