How do you speak about time? I want to spend a few moments tonight listening to the language we use about time. The language we use about time reveals whether we are powerful or powerless people. It discloses whether we really believe that God is in control of history. And it indicates what kind of a surprise we'll get on judgement day.

Let's start with the way we speak about time and what it tells us about power. We think of time as being something we all experience equally – after all, when it’s 10 o'clock in our own home, it’s 10 o'clock in every other home in England, whether that home is a palace or a cardboard box. But you can find out how people relate to time by listening to the language they use.

If you’re powerful, you talk about time as something you can control. The central notion of control in a consumer society is that of a financial transaction. Thus time is translated into a commodity. Time becomes one of the most valuable things money can buy. Time is always considered a limited commodity. People who’re busy and important are those whose time is always in demand. Listen to the language these people use about time. They ‘buy’ time, as if time were something you could order on discount from the internet. They ‘spend’ time, as if time were some kind of currency of exchange. They ‘use’ time as if it were some kind of garden implement. Sometimes they ‘invest’ time, often a great deal of time. On other occasions they ‘put time aside’, as if it were a pre-wrapped chocolate collection one kept handy for the next batch of trick-or-treaters on Hallowe’en. ‘Don’t “lose” precious time’ they tell you, but if they like you, they will ‘find’ time to see you.

Every time they look for a new technological innovation, their first question is whether it will ‘save’ time. It’s never clear how they ‘spend’ the time these gadgets have ‘saved’. What you must never do is ‘waste’ their time. Just to remind you that they are important, and that they are important just to the degree that they can control time, they demonstrate their ability to calibrate time, making some time more important and valuable than others – their time, of course. Hence the expression ‘quality’ time. Quality time is presumably time you buy at Waitrose rather than Lidl. In other words, a better class of time, as if one were speaking of a better class of coffee or breakfast cereal. All of these idioms for engaging time culminate when the breathless executive reminds the lackadaisical staff that ‘time is money.’ Now at last it makes sense to talk of saving, wasting, spending, investing and putting aside, for time is money. And money gets you every commodity an economy of limited resources has to offer – hence the language of buying and quality.

By contrast there’s another group of people. This group would love to be busy and important, but for a variety of reasons they feel that they aren't. Their division from the first group is not so much about wealth or income, or even educational attainment or physical prowess. It’s about the fact that they’re on the supply side of the time economy. Their time is not in hot demand. It’s not in short supply. Because they’re not in a hurry, they’re considered by the first group to be ‘wasting’ time. There’s no doubt that they’re ‘losing precious time’ in life’s rat race. By any standards of measuring time as money or as the commodity money can buy, these people are poor. But the irony is, they have an abundance of what the powerful people seem constantly to be short of – time. Nonetheless they very often see the world as the powerful perceive it, and thus regard their situation as a bad one. They quickly come to see time as an enemy, and frequently use battle-language. Time is ‘against’ them, or ‘presses in on’ them; it ‘weighs heavy’ on their lives. They seem to be failing the ‘test’ of time. The saddest language is that which speaks of ‘killing’ time, since those who set out to kill time almost always lose the battle.
And that brings us to Advent Sunday. Advent celebrates two things. It celebrates the most important news about the past, and it celebrates the most important news about the future. The most important news about the past is that Christ has come. The most important news about the future is that Christ is coming back. And now we live in the ‘meantime.’ The curious thing is that no one seems to be too happy with the meantime. The powerful people say ‘Life’s too short’. The powerless people say, ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’

But what if we believed God was saying, ‘I’ve given you just the right length of time to do just exactly the things I call you to do – and when that time’s up, I’ll do the rest.’ Several times in the gospels Jesus predicts that there’ll be a dramatic climax to the story of the world. At the end of time, God finally intervenes and brings justice and peace to the whole creation.

What Jesus does by showing us the end of the world is to take time out of our hands. God says ‘If you’re going to treat time as an enemy or as a commodity I’m going to take time away from you. I’ll give you back a new time, but you must treat this time differently. Stop taking about time as if it were in short supply. It’s not part of the economy in that clumsy way. You must now treat time as a gift and as a friend.’

Time is a gift, because we live in God’s time, not our own. We can never ‘buy’ time, because time can never belong to us. It always still belongs to God. Time is 'on our side'. We can't buy time with God: God doesn’t do deals. We must learn to enjoy God’s time. Time is the word for the existence that God continues to give us and that we can never own. Do you really believe God’s saying ‘I will give you all the time to do what I really want you to do’? Does your life reflect that? Or are you constantly trying to squeeze more into the day than the day can contain, seeking to hold back the waters of time through endeavouring to preserve your youthful looks, rushing around proclaiming to the world by your busyness that God’s on annual leave and you’re filling in for a while? If time’s a gift, time’s on your side. Time is not a commodity. It is not in short supply. You may not have all the time you want. But you have all the time you need.

And time is a friend. Time is a friend because we’ve nothing to fear from what God has in store for us. The face we see on the judgement seat will be the face we’ve seen on the cross and on the day of resurrection. Judgement Day may bring some surprises, but it will bring no shocks. We know God’s character and it’s not going to change. If time is our friend, we can enjoy time with those who don’t promise to make the world a better place. We can be with prisoners, with young children, with the very elderly – for that’s where God spends time. If time is a gift, we can enjoy that gift with all sorts of people who don’t contribute to our status – with the very sick, with homeless people, with the mentally ill. When the Church is full of people like this, it’s evidence that the church is living in a new time. This is what we mean by the ‘kingdom breaking in’. The kingdom of God breaks in to our community when people start living as if God is king. We’ll be judged by our attitude to time, for the way we see time is a measure of our faith. Every bit of time you spend this week with a powerless person is part of this church’s proclamation of gospel hope.

If there’s one social group that exposes the link between our attitude to time and our attitude to God, it is people with severe learning disabilities. Such people simply take up a tremendous amount of time. And such time is very difficult to render in money or commodity language, because many such people don’t seem to progress, if progress means ‘become like the rest of the population.’ It’s no use being sentimental about such people, because many are exasperating company in the way they dismantle all of society’s presuppositions about logic, manners, and private space. The tendency of our culture is to treat people with learning disability in the same kind of way we treat time. Either we treat them as a commodity, needing to be housed and cared for and somehow dealt with. Or we treat them as an enemy, a person whose life should if possible be prevented from coming into existence, or at least be inhibited from unduly damaging the lives around it. But our task as Christians is to come to see such a person as a gift and a friend. A gift, because in their life God is giving us something we did not have before, someone we need if we are to be everything God calls us to be. And a friend, because in finding, as we relate to this person, we have nothing to fear, we discover that our true hope lies not in our striving but in God’s grace. If you do one thing for God this Advent, spend some time with a person with a severe learning disability. The way you relate to this person will epitomise what you believe about time.
It's easy to slip into old ways, and treat time and people as commodities for our own advancement, or enemies in the way of our freedom. But gathering together in worship as we are doing now is a constant reminder that we're living in God's time, not our own. By the standards of the powerful worship, like being with a person with a severe learning disability, is a right old waste of time. But we're here because we believe that in Christ God has come, and is coming back. We're here because time is no longer against us, and it's no longer in short supply. We're here because there's simply nothing better in life than to worship God with others who love the kingdom like you do. And if it takes all the time in the world, it doesn't matter – because it's God's time.