

Christmas – 2019 – Abbot Michael Liebl OSB

I asked a friend if he could offer a suggestion about a homily for Christmas. He had a quick reply – about two minutes he said. Start your timepieces and we will see how I do.

Actually, time is a wonderful suggestion for a Christmas reflection. When I was a kid at the swimming pool, time flew by. When I was a kid waiting for a doctor's appointment, time could not have crawled along more slowly. Which is a way of saying that time has a subjective nature. But it is objective too. Astronomers use the stars to mark the passage of time.

Scientists are puzzled by time. At the microscopic level, you can't tell the difference between interactions going forward and backward in time. But we never see a broken egg miraculously re-assemble itself. Spilled milk never flows back into a glass. A sin in the garden of Eden cannot be undone by a human being. Well almost.

Greek philosophers used different words for time. Chronos as in the word chronology was the experience of time flowing like a river, or stars wheeling through heavens. Kairos was an extraordinary moment in time, a moment when the divine burstw into the mundane as if a comet or a nova suddenly appeared. And telos referred to the end of time as if all the events in our personal and collective history were moving inexorably towards some unseen but purposeful goal, as when the sun and the moon will no longer shine.

Christmas – the birth of Christ – magically incorporates all those notions of time. Christ was born at a moment in time, a chronos which we can find on a calendar when Caesar ordered all the world to complete a census. So Joseph took his wife to Bethlehem, the city of their origin to be counted in the census. And that moment proved to be also a moment of Kairos when the divine entered our world. A star appeared over Bethlehem beckoning the magi. The angels appeared in the sky singing Hosanna to the new born king. It was a moment of unrivalled grace. And that birth also signaled a new telos, a new goal for the passage of time. For now human beings could return to the garden of Eden because miraculously, this new born baby was both God and human.

Because of Christ's birth tonight, time is not just chronos, not just the ticking of a clock. Because of Christ's birth tonight, whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, it is a moment of Kairos when the grace of God bursts into our world. Because of Christ's birth tonight, the telos of humanity, the goal of our existence has been forever changed. In a real measure, we can now run time backward. We are not doomed to dissolution and despair. We are restored as creatures sharing in the life that God intended when he placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. And every moment that passes just takes us one step closer to the God who sent his son to live among us.

Chronos, Kairos, telos – inseparable on this enchanted evening. Merry Christmas to all.