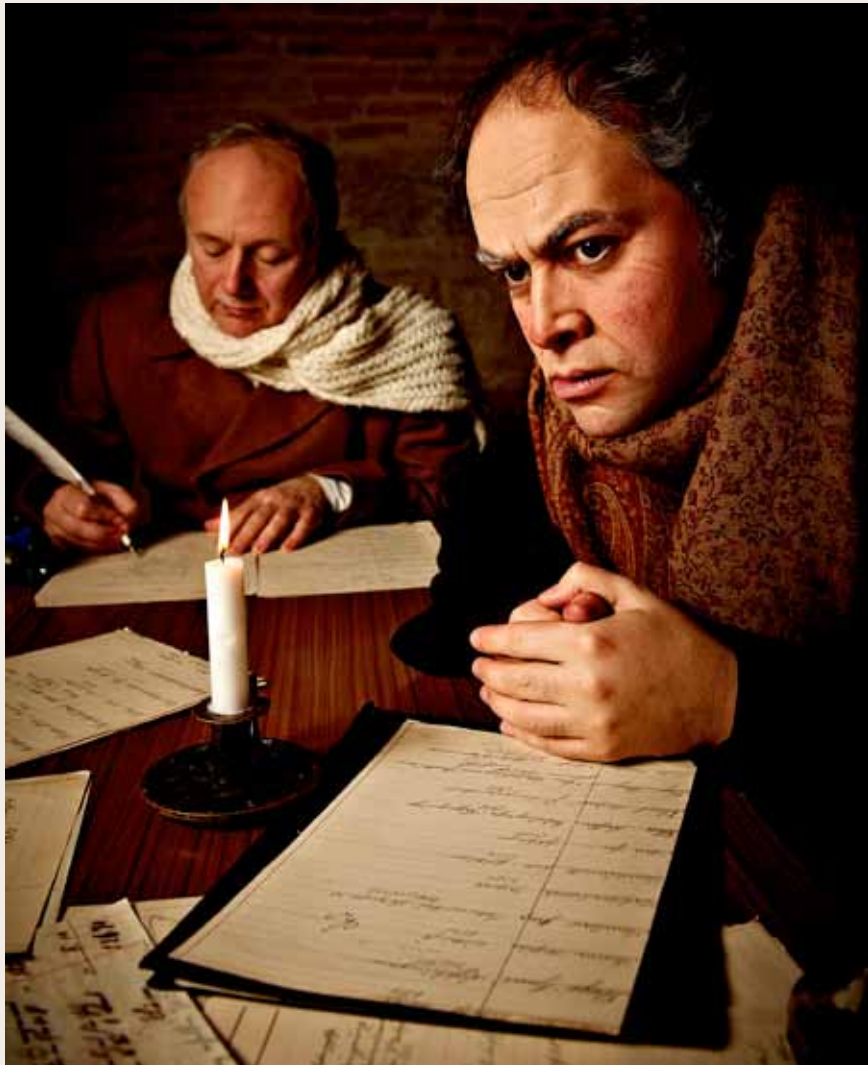


TIME IS NOT MONEY

This is a difficult but crucial lesson for even the most hard-working of us to learn, says **Stephen Cherry**



Photograph: Ebenezer Scrooge and Bob Cratchit by Czar/Flickr

THE AMERICAN STATESMAN Benjamin Franklin is well known for his wise sayings. Among the most famous is his equation of time and money. Sometimes it is true. When you are in a taxi, for instance, or when speaking on the phone to a lawyer. And while it is not universally so, there is in the employment contract of many some kind of relationship between time and money. It is also true in projects, not least construction works. I well recall a church architect saying to the contractors that it was in everyone's best interest to get

the job turned around quickly. The client is happy to see the builders go and they can make more money if they get the work done fast. It's what known as a win-win.

Yet there are also ways in which time is not like money. There are such things as time banks, but they don't work in quite the same way as financial banks. Time is too much like Heraclitus' famous river, which you can never step in twice because the second time is not the same river – and you are not the same person. Time is the medium through which things change. One moment is not the same as the next and five minutes "saved" today cannot be spent tomorrow. There is nowhere to "deposit" time. Every day, hour, minute and second is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

'Ebenezer Scrooge's number one problem was not that he was mean, but that he did not have time'

This truth is, of course, lost on the young – that is, those younger than me. We realise it more and more acutely as we get older. And it is the haunting dream of the ex-workaholic. "No one on their deathbed," the proverb goes, "says they wish they had spent more time at the office."

It is a hard lesson for people to learn once they have discovered the joys of productive effort and hard work. People in ministry sometimes realise it only after a crisis or breakdown. One seasonal story can be read as an accurate and precise debunking of the myth that time is no more valuable than money. It is Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. The story of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Everybody knows the story. Scrooge started off mean and miserable and ended up generous and happy. His humbugging of Christmas turned into the warmest of good wishes. His belligerence became benevolence overnight. Everybody also knows that the difference between "before" and "after" was not a self-determined change of mind, but the terrified response to three ghostly dreams, which showed him Christmas past, present and future.

But when everybody knows something, you can be sure that everybody has missed something even more obvious and even more important. A Christmas Carol isn't mainly about miserliness and money. It is about

time. Ebenezer Scrooge's number one problem was not that he was mean, but that he did not have time. Anxious about the pennies, and believing Franklin's half-truth, "time is money", as if gospel, he gave all his time to his work. The genius of Dickens, who must have been as

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industrious as the next man to produce so many words, was that he saw that the fundamental problem was not attitude to money but attitude to time.

There are plenty of witty clues in the book itself to suggest that time is the true theme of A Christmas Carol. The three ghosts at the heart of the story ("Past", "Present" and "Future") have the task of introducing our anti-hero to the temporal dimension. Their visits come at precisely one o'clock in the morning and, while they are all extensive, they take no time. A main focus of Scrooge's bullying of Bob Cratchit was timekeeping. Towards the end of the book the new Scrooge gets to work early so that he can catch Bob coming in late.

Dickens uses the drama of the ticking clock to bring it vividly to life. "The clock struck nine. No Bob. A quarter past. No Bob. He was a full 18 and a half minutes behind his time." As the book ends there is a new hint every minute for the reader. "It's only once a year, sir," pleads the tardy Bob. "I was making rather merry yesterday, sir."

It all becomes brilliantly clear as Scrooge's conversion to a better life is narrated. Certainly he vows to honour Christmas in his heart. The next step is to try to keep it all year. We are getting close, though not yet at the nub of the matter. But here it comes. Scrooge declares: "I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

What Scrooge learned is that time is not money. It is far more subtle and significant than that. It is in the 3D quality of the moment, the richness of the whole life, that true wealth is to be found.

The lesson of A Christmas Carol is this: rather than being money, time is priceless. ■

The Revd Canon Dr **Stephen Cherry** is a residential canon of Durham Cathedral. His latest book is *Beyond Busyness: Time Wisdom for Ministry* (Sacristy Press, 2012)



Sheila Maxey *On the pilgrim way*

I have always been a long-term planner, but I only discovered as an adult that not everyone has a mental diagram of the year ahead. My years have four corners – end of April, June, September and December – and as I write that down I suddenly wonder if one reason why I find the early months of the calendar year so depressingly interminable is because that section of "my" year has an extra month. In terms of efficiency, my long-term planning has its uses; but in terms of a full and faithful life it has real shortcomings.

Like many young mothers, I often found myself impatiently looking forward to when my children would be out of nappies, beyond the "terrible twos", off to nursery, to school, and out of the difficult teenage years. I probably said more than once, in exasperation: "Do grow up!" I am so impressed by the way my daughter-in-law, an older mother of one precious child, is in no such rush.

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My hurry to reach some imagined desirable future showed up again when I was much older. My parents came to live next door when they were in their early 80s. When they reached their early 90s I began to realise, to my shame, that I was looking forward to when my dear parents had died, because then I would be able to make a move that would be good for me and the churches where I ministered.

So I began – with help from a wise monk – to learn: to pay full attention to each day (attentiveness is an important word among spiritual writers), to wait and watch for God's surprises rather than wait (impatiently) for my own plans and dreams to be fulfilled. Eventually, on my 55th birthday, I was offered a Church House post, which meant I could begin a new ministry and remain in my present house, with my parents next door. My mother lived to be 98 and my father 100!

At this time of year I often think about old Simeon who waited and watched all his long life for God's Messiah and was not disappointed. We hear nothing of his achievements, but only of his waiting and watching. I feel very sad when I meet people who are disappointed with life – their hopes not fulfilled, the causes they worked for apparently failures, ill-health taking away their energy and abilities. I want to be able to be like Simeon and to say, with the psalmist:

For God alone my soul in silence waits (Psalms 62:1) ■

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