

A time for everything.

Our Old Testament reading this morning comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. Along with the Psalms, Proverbs, Job and the Song of Songs, it is part of the scriptures that we refer to as the books of Wisdom. Traditionally, the book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to King Solomon (though the writer is only referred to as 'the Teacher' in the text).

Ecclesiastes, though, is a strange book – it is cynical and pessimistic. I turn to my NIV translation of the bible and find the translators have added section titles which include “Everything is meaningless” (1:1-11), “Wisdom is meaningless” (1:12-18), “Pleasures are meaningless” (2:1-11), “Wisdom and folly are meaningless” (2:12-16) and “Toil is meaningless” (2:17-26) – and that’s just in the first two chapters! It doesn’t seem to be an inviting read.

But despite its apparent strangeness, the book of Ecclesiastes has contributed a lot to our language – most people aren’t familiar with Ecclesiastes as a book of the bible, but most people know many its phrases – “vanity of vanities” (1:2), “There is nothing new under the sun” (1:9), “eat and drink and be merry” (8:15) and even “a fly in the ointment” (10:1).

The most famous part of Ecclesiastes, though, is the first eight verses of this morning’s reading from chapter three – and that’s because we know them as a song.

In 1959 the folk singer, Pete Seeger, took those words added a few of his own, and wrote a melody... the resulting song was titled ‘Turn! Turn! Turn! Later’, and later it was sung by the Byrds and it became a hit. It’s a song that remains instantly recognisable, and one that symbolises a particular era in modern history:

To everything, turn, turn, turn,
There is a season, turn, turn, turn,
And a time to every purpose under heaven...
A time for love, a time for hate,
A time for peace, I swear it's not too late.

The words of Pete Seeger’s song, are words from Ecclesiastes! He only contributed a few words – “Turn” (three times) plus the phrase “I swear it’s not too late” at the end.

This morning’s reading tells us that there is a time for every activity under heaven - and in this context, heaven is not the otherworldly paradise (the one with angels playing harps on clouds), rather it is the skies. Every activity under heaven therefore refers to every activity on earth.

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to uproot... and so on

All of those things that the writer of Ecclesiastes talks about are the things that make up our lives. The activities under heaven are the things of life. The things of all our lives. Everyone is born, it’s fair to say that everyone is going to die, and a whole lot of stuff happens in between. Weeping and laughing, silence and talking, love and hate, good and bad, highs and lows, triumphs and tragedy, hope and despair.

And generally, these things happen over and over again – it's a cycle. A daily cycle. A seasonal cycle. A lifetime cycle.

A few years ago, when I was at Cherrybrook and helping with the Cherubs play group, I was enjoying leading music. I mentioned to my daughter Hazel that I particularly enjoyed 'If you're happy and you know it' – and everyone loved going through the actions – clapping, stomping and so on. Hazel, then studying Early Childhood Education, said that it shouldn't be "If you're happy and you know it" all the time – we should let children know that it's okay to experience and express other emotions, too.

And so we changed it. And we started singing, 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands' and the second verse was 'If you're grumpy and you know it stomp your feet'. Now, if you're grumpy, you might be tired, so the third verse became 'If you're tired and you know it have a rest. And after the rest, if you're awake and you know it have a stretch. And so on... right the way back to being happy and clapping your hands again. It was like the book of Ecclesiastes translated for three-year-olds!

But it's always a cycle. Born – die. Plant – uproot. Weep – laugh. And so I think that this a great reading to reflect on on New Year's Day. It's pretty much the biggest time for people to reflect on these cycles: What happened last year? What's going to happen this year? What New Year's resolution will I make? And so on.

I think we've particularly seen that over the last three years. Remember 2019/20, when we had bushfires raging, and hoped for rain and cooler weather? And then the end of 2020 when we hoped that 2021 would be the end of Covid? And then at the end of 2021 when we thought much the same thing?

Often, when we consider Ecclesiastes 3, we stop at the end of verse 8, as Pete Seeger did, with the end of the poetic lines about there being a time for one thing, and another, over and over again, but today our lectionary compilers have taken us past verse 8.

Having told us of all the times of lives, the writer of Ecclesiastes asks, 'What do workers gain from their toil?' or I guess even 'What's the meaning of all this?' or perhaps 'is there anything more to life than these times over and over again'?

The writer tells us he has seen the burden God has laid on the human race, but also that God has made everything beautiful in its time. He tells us that God has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. It's something so amazing that we can't grasp it. But we long for it, and we look for it, but it is, in many ways, beyond our understanding.

The reading tells us "...there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God." (3:12-13)

There are those that will say that this life doesn't matter – it's all about what's to come, or that being a follower of Jesus is all about receiving a 'ticket to heaven'. But the writer tells us this life does matter, that we should be happy, that we should do good, that we should find satisfaction in whatever we do and we should eat and drink and enjoy the good things of this world. Because our lives are a gift from God.

But don't forget there is something more. So often, society wants us to want more in this life. More wealth. More prestige. More power. More security. A better career path. The pressure is not so much to keep up with the Joneses, but to get past them. But that's not the message of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who says instead "be happy and to do good... and find satisfaction in all [your] toil". That's not to say you have to put up with things or grin and bear it, but instead. Find happiness in your life. Do good things for others. Find a job – or a pastime – that gives you satisfaction.

I've shared before the story of Terrence, who plastered our kitchen renovation. He'd learned the trade, set up his own business, took on bigger and bigger contracts, had people working for him, he stopped plastering himself and started managing other plasterers. He was successful, but the business was also stressful. So, he decided to wind up his own plastering business, pick up the tools and go back to work for someone else. He's a good plasterer. He enjoys plastering, and people appreciate his work. The pay's not as good as the money he was making running the business, but he said all the stress has gone from his life. Other people may have been more successful, but Terrence found satisfaction.

Don't forget there is something more. Something more, but not in terms of worldly success. It's something we long for, but something we can't find on our own. Something beyond the week to week, year to year cycle of human life. God has given us the gift of his Son, Jesus, to die for us on the cross, and to rise again, to open the way to everlasting life.

Today, we look back on 2022, and we look forward to 2023. All the good and bad things that happened last year, and all the good and bad things that will or might happen this year. And we wonder what time it is for us – as individuals, as families, as a church, as a country and even as a world. Will 2023 be a time to kill or a time to heal or will it be a time to mourn or a time to dance? Or will it be all of those things, as the cycle of life and death in this world continues?

Much has been made of the census results that revealed that those identifying as Christians are now a minority in Australia – and the church has been in decline in most forms and in most places for quite a while now. We're left wondering what difference faith in God makes, and indeed, what difference we can make, whether as individuals or as a church, in the comings and goings of human life.

So, do we – as a church, as a denomination, as a congregation, and even as individuals shake our heads and wring our hands at an uncertain future? Do we despair for the traditions that we stand to lose? Do we give up because we think we can't possibly make a difference anymore? Is it all too much? Is it a time to mourn, or is it a time to dance?

Because there is a time for every purpose under heaven, sometimes it will be a time to plant, sometimes a time to uproot, sometimes it will be a time to embrace, and sometimes a time to refrain from embracing; sometimes it will be a time to be silent, and sometimes it will be a time to speak.

We need to remember, as we go through those times, over and over again, that Jesus told us not to be afraid when we "hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Mark 13:7-8)

Those things are facts of the world we live in... and, and as I've said before, I think to wars and earthquakes and famines we could fairly add bushfires and droughts and floods and even global pandemics.

It's the cycle of the world. But we mustn't forget that every drought ends in rain, every flood ends in sunshine, and every dark night ends with a sunrise.

But I think it's important too, to remember that in Ecclesiastes' description of the activities under heaven, they are just that: activities. There isn't, according to the teacher, a time to do nothing.

We should enjoy the things of our lives and of this world. The wonders of creation, and the wonders of human fellowship and relationship. So we can eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all our toil—and appreciate those things as the gift of God. The writer reinforces the point in chapter 8 – “So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat, drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.” (8:15)

People often assume that the Christian life isn't keen on joy. That Christians avoid the pleasures of the world. That being a Christian is very serious business indeed. I think joy is the most neglected of the fruits of the spirit. But the message of Jesus, the gospel, is good news. As we heard last week on Christmas Day, the angel said to the shepherds “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

If we follow Jesus, then we can trust him to lead us through it all of life's challenges and hardships. Through the time to kill and the time to heal, through the time to tear down and the time to build, through the time to search and the time to give up, through the time to keep and the time to throw away.

If we are following Jesus through seeking his word and through prayer, then we can follow him with confidence.

Jesus goes ahead of us and calls us all to follow him. Throughout the gospel accounts, Jesus calls people to come to him, to follow him. Throughout our lives, and through death, into new life.

Even if, for us, today is a time to mourn, we can trust God's goodness, and know that there will also be a time to dance.

Friends, be assured that there is a time for every purpose under heaven, and know that our time, the time for us to make a difference, is now.

Amen.