

Ecclesiastes 3.1-13

A Time for God?

Amington (Online)

Sunday 8 November 2020

Remembrance Sunday

2020

I preached on this passage on Remembrance Sunday four years ago, and began by saying what a year it had been... highlighting among other things the rise of far right politics, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. I wonder if instead of chapter 3 I should have taken Ecclesiastes 1.9 as my text:

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1.9 (NIV)

Bad as 2016 may have been, it feels a little like 2020 is one of the Yorkshiremen in the Monty Python sketch... 'Huh, you were lucky, we used to dream of only having Brexit to worry about.'

Accents have never been my strong suit.

Grumpy Old Men

Although we can't know for certain, Ecclesiastes is traditionally regarded as King Solomon's reflections towards the end of his reign. He was looking back on life, passing on wise advice to his children, to help them find the proper perspective on life.

Do you remember the BBC TV show *Grumpy Old Men*? Various older male celebrities were put on-screen, to complain about, well, everything.

Ecclesiastes can read a bit like that: the ancient version of *Grumpy Old Men*. **There's nothing new under the sun** (1.9), everything that's born will one day die (3.2). Everything we have we will one day lose: **all come from dust, and to dust all return** (3.20). The refrain of Ecclesiastes is: **meaningless, meaningless: everything is meaningless** (1.2 etc).

What's the point? Why bother?

Well thankfully, when we dig a little more deeply into Ecclesiastes, that's not what Solomon meant at all. He wanted to jolt us out of complacency, he wanted to show us how things really are. He was trying to turn us away from things that are only temporary, towards the only thing – the only *one* – who is *constant*: God.

Perspective

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens... (1). We might add: there is a time for a lockdown, and a time to see our families again.

In the middle of a storm, it is difficult to see how things could be any calmer. In the middle of pain, it is difficult to see how things could be happier. I can't really remember what it's like to be able to arrange to see my friends. But everything has its time, Solomon says: nothing lasts forever, nothing is permanent. For every dark night there will be a dawn, and for every 2020, there will be a 2021. And, for every shining day, eventually darkness will fall.

Instead of pushing us into a deep depression about the world and its futility, this truth is intended to help us see the bigger picture of life: that it is difficult, that it has highs and lows, that it is a constant up and down mix of struggles and joys. That's normal, Solomon says – so enjoy the good bits, and when the bad comes, know that it will not last forever.

Now, I don't think Solomon approved of that. He wasn't saying it's a *good* thing that there is **a time to weep and mourn** as well as **a time to laugh and dance** (4). That's simply how things are. Part of wisdom is being honest about how things *actually* are.

So when he said there is **a time for war and a time for peace** (8), he meant that sometimes war is unavoidable, *not* that sometimes war is good. Personally, I'm not sure I would ever use the word 'right' to describe a war – but even war has its time. Sometimes war is necessary, sometimes it is the least bad of the options we are faced with, and today we commemorate all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives fighting for our freedom.

Sometimes people say, 'everything happens for a reason'. But I'm afraid I think that's nonsense. One of the reasons the world can be so painful is the senseless and needless nature of suffering. Wars are almost always started when rich and powerful (let's be honest) men get greedy for even more than they already have.

'Everything happens for a reason'? Nonsense. Everything has its time, true, but that doesn't mean everything is *good*. Wisdom means being *honest* about how the world is, and honestly, there is so much senseless violence and war in the world it hurts. There is no *reason* for this pandemic. Sometimes bad stuff just happens.

Solomon wanted to acknowledge that. He wasn't saying it's ok, or good – but it is real, it is how things *actually* are. Solomon wanted to pass on that important perspective to his children: this is how it is. **But it is not all there is.**

Something More

In verse 11 of our reading Solomon says: **God has set eternity in the human heart.** This is the sense we all have of there being 'something more', that this – *gesture around* – can't be *it*. Don't get me wrong, I love my wife, I love the beauty of creation, I love technology – sometimes – I love going away on holiday – when it's allowed – I love all that... but surely, *surely* there is more to life than this?

There is: **God has set eternity in the human heart.** Within each one of us is a longing for something more – and that longing can only be satisfied in God.

A woman said her friend, rather annoyed with him, 'Why are you so late?' 'Ahh,' he said, 'There was a man who lost a £50 note.' 'That's kind of you to help him look for it,' she said. 'No, you don't understand,' he said, 'I was standing on it.'

Everything we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch – even £50 notes – is transient, temporary – *meaningless* to use the language of Ecclesiastes. It satisfies for a moment – but we end up wanting more – always *more*. That’s why stuff doesn’t satisfy: because ‘more’ is never ‘enough’. In fact, Solomon says in chapter 5 verse 10: **whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.** Your deepest longing will never be satisfied by wealth or possessions.

The Rich Young Man

Jesus once met a young man who was very wealthy. In those days wealth was a sign of blessing from God – sure and certain proof that you were going to get a good seat at the heavenly banquet.

This young man came to Jesus and asked (Mark 10.17), **‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’** He wanted Jesus to look at him, smile, and say something like, ‘Nothing my friend, your fabulous wealth shows us you’re practically there already.’

Jesus played along and said, **‘You know the commandments: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother’** (Mark 10.19).

‘Ahh,’ **he declared**, probably with a smirk on his face, **‘all these I have kept since I was a boy’** (Mark 10.20).

‘One thing you lack,’ Jesus said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me’ (Mark 10.21).

In the summary of the law that the young man was so proud of keeping, Jesus listed the ten commandments. Or at least, the ones that had nothing to do with God. He missed off the first four: there is one God, worship no God but him, do not swear by the name of God, honour the seventh day as holy to God.

The young man had wealth *and* religion – he was a good man! But he was missing something in his life: God. He was proud of his good behaviour. He was so wealthy. But that was not enough.

Whether or not Jesus meant the young man literally had to sell all his stuff, I don’t know. But he did mean: all that stuff needs to come second; God needs to be number one. Real treasure isn’t found in the things you have; real treasure is found in God. Only *he* satisfies the longing in our hearts, only *he* can fill the eternity-shaped hole that *he* put within us.

There is a time for everything – but do we make time for God?

Number One

I wonder comes *first* for you? Is it all this stuff?

Or maybe, right now, it's fear. Maybe fear has gripped your heart and won't let go: fear of catching Covid, fear of other people who aren't following the rules, fear of losing loving ones, fear of losing your job, fear of things never getting back to normal – the list goes on. Fear can dominate us every bit as much as wealth.

The danger with both, is that we can get stuck. With wealth, it's pretty obvious: as Solomon said, *more* is never *enough*. With fear, it's a bit more subtle. We can get addicted to the adrenalin, to being able to complain, to feeling sorry for ourselves, to blaming other people, to being able to say, 'For once it's not my fault!'

Friends, we need the perspective Solomon was teaching. This is how it is – but it is not *all* there is. The ups and the downs of this life? – neither lasts for ever. But God does.

If we do what that young man struggled to do, and lift our eyes beyond all this, we will see God who is *more* and *above* and *beyond* wealth and this mess we're in – and we will find true treasure, the only lasting treasure, the only solid rock and foundation that is ours in Jesus Christ. And the best news is: he wants *you*, *now*, *today*.

God's Love

When I told the story of Jesus' encounter with that rich young man, I missed out quite an important bit.

Mark 10 verse 21: **Jesus looked at him and loved him.** He didn't scream or shout. He didn't sneer or argue – but nor did he water down or hide the truth of what that young man needed to do.

Jesus looked at him and loved him. This is compassion with truth, and it is how Jesus looks at you.

If you turn away from wealth and fear, and everything else that hinders and holds you back, and if you turn towards Jesus, you'll find he's already here, looking at you, loving you.

The question is: will you? Will you turn, and will you respond?